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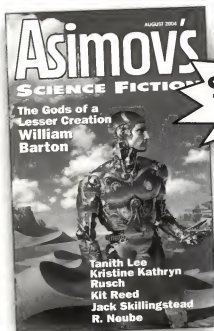
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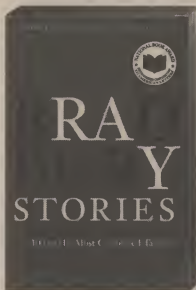
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Shortly after our January 2005 issue was released to our printer, I received a note from a long-time reader scribbled on a subscription order form. This note had traveled on a circuitous route via ground transportation, interoffice mail, and perhaps even pneumatic tubes, from our fulfillment center in Connecticut to our editorial office in New York City. The journey took some time to complete, so the letter writer was unaware of the transitions taking place at the magazine when he dropped his note in the mail. He made some recommendations, however, that were not that different from the changes we are instituting at the magazine. The writer suggested that we “re-Asimovfy” the magazine with a return to a letters column and editorials. Unfortunately, we can’t give this reader Isaac’s wonderful editorials—except online where we often reprint them at www.asimovs.com.

The April/May issue does bring back the letters column, and our new nonfiction column, Thought Experiments, provides us with the opportunity to take a contemporary look at subjects that were important to Isaac. This month’s essay by Therese Littleton profiles Helen Greiner, a real-life Susan Calvin and the purveyor of the Roomba vacuum cleaner, who named her company after Isaac’s book, *I, Robot*.

The “World Robotics 2004” survey published by The United Na-

tions Economic Commission for Europe with the International Federation of Robotics speculates that while there were around six hundred thousand household robots in use by December 2003, there will be over four million such robots by 2007. The integration of robots in our daily lives, as with all quickly paced technical developments, opens up practical, political, and ethical issues that future Thought Experiments will highlight and discuss.

Household robots, obviously, have a long way to go before they reach any semblance of perfection. One can imagine that a Roomba let loose in my cluttered two-bedroom Manhattan apartment (and home to an active family of four) would either finally learn to cry or shut itself down to avoid a horrendous recursive loop. Still, once these logistical difficulties are worked out, it will be hard to say no to a robot willing to relieve me from my drudgework.

Once robots can pass the equivalent of a Turing Test, where a conversation or even face-to-face interaction with a mechanical being is indistinguishable from one with a human being, it may be equally as difficult to say no to service from a helpful robot clerk that may be more pleasant and knowledgeable than some humans. We don’t like the idea of jobs being outsourced to other countries. It’s quite likely that we may not be very comfortable with having jobs that are de-

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pendent on people skills and that currently seem impervious to automation become the province of robots. Will CNN's Lou Dobbs or his future equivalent run angry features on 'botsourcing?

It is also possible that humans may do jobs that might better go to robots. Without robots, we would not be exploring Mars, and robotics has transformed modern warfare. In recent months, President Bush has emphasized manned space exploration over robotics. This emphasis certainly sounds exciting to the science fiction author and reader, but it may interfere with developments in robotics. It would be disappointing to see the near-term future of robots centered along mundane household tasks rather than space exploration. Should we care or be worried if this happens?

Close at home, though, robots can, and do, help humans in some profound ways. Robots are already an integral part of certain surgical procedures. Yoshiyuki Sankai, a Japanese professor of engineering who was influenced by Isaac's novels as a child, has invented a robot suit that will aid the disabled, and he is working on perfecting it. I can imagine a very exciting future filled with robots such as these.

I can imagine a future where robots are misused, too. It appears that most developments in robotics are currently in the military. We applaud when military advances cut down on our casualties (and, with a sister in the army, I am fully aware of these concerns), but many people have asked if modern warfare helps us become inured to the loss of civilian lives, or even to a massive loss of opposition lives. We don't really know whether robots will complicate this problem, alle-

viate it, or have no effect at all. And, spin-offs from military research have contributed to many of the advancements in household robotics.

Naturally, all of the concerns mentioned here have been addressed in science fiction. From Isaac's original robot stories to tales that appeared in *Asimov's*, such as Lucius Shepard's "Fire Zone Emerald" and "R&R" and James Patrick Kelly's "Prisoner of Chillon." None of these stories are new, either, but the current advancements in robotics are. These advancements are certain to influence future SF tales. They may shape the main plots, or they may simply act as wallpaper.

In his own stories, Isaac imagined a number of kinds of futures with robots. In many of his stories, people were afraid of robots, and robots often had to labor in secret to save humanity from itself. In others, people became so dependent on robots that they preferred them over all human company. The Good Doctor is best known, though, for a far more reasonable approach to robots. He felt that humanity should benefit from, rather than fear, its own ingenuity. In a delightful story of social satire, "Christmas Without Rodney" (*Asimov's*, Mid-December 1988), Isaac showed an elderly couple humbling along with difficulty—but not completely ineptly—when they give their robot a vacation. Perhaps that story mirrors how we will cope when the Roomba gets to take the weekend off.

On occasion, I will run pieces in *Asimov's* that will explore different aspects of these questions, and I plan to publish essays that take opposing sides. I'd like to hear your thoughts on these subjects, too. ○

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FANTASIES ABOUT FICTION

These days we seem to be losing the distinctions between fact and fiction, between reality and fantasy, between fantasy and fiction. The strange mix of hedonism and puritanism, of anything-goes morality combined with fierce political correctness, that our culture has spawned is now tossing up some very odd, even pathological patterns of behavior.

Consider the poor sap in some midwestern state—Ohio, was it?—who liked to write little stories about grown men having sexual relations with pre-pubescent children. He wrote those stories, sick as they may have been, *purely for his own amusement*. He did not attempt to get them published. He did not share them with his fellow pedophiles. He did not post them on a web site. He simply stored them on his own computer; and when that computer somehow fell into someone else's hands (those of a repair technician, perhaps?) and the nature of his fictional fantasies was discovered, this guy was arrested and put on trial and *sentenced to prison for something like seven years*, though a higher court eventually threw the verdict out.

We all have our opinions about the merits of letting grown men have sexual relations with pre-pubescent children, and very few of us are in favor of such stuff. Most of us think that it's wrong to inveigle kids into such activities and that it is proper for the people we term "child molesters" to pay a legal price for

such molestations. But the stories that that guy in Ohio, or wherever it was, was making up, did no actual harm to actual children. Whatever took place in them was wholly imaginary and received no public circulation. They were fantasies—sick fantasies, sure, but fantasies even so. Instead of keeping them within his own skull, where most of us keep our fantasies, sick and otherwise, this fellow confided them to his computer. Once they were discovered there—do closet pedophiles have no right to privacy?—he was hauled off to the hoosegow. George Orwell had a term for that sort of offense: *thoughtcrime*. But only in the world of Big Brother, so I thought, was thoughtcrime an offense punished by imprisonment. Not so, apparently, in the oh-so-sensitive modern United States.

Then there have been instances here and there around the country of students who whiled away the idle hours in their classrooms by drawing pictures of their teachers being menaced by knives or revolvers, and being suspended or even expelled for indulging in such ugly daydreams. There have been cases of students turning in stories as class assignments that dealt with Columbine-style school massacres, and being suspended or expelled for those, as though an attempt to comprehend the mind of mass murderers by recreating their vile deeds in fictional form was somehow tantamount to planning one's own Columbine shootout.

And now we have the case of Jan Richman, a writing instructor at San Francisco's Academy of Art University, who asked her students to read a story called "The Girl With Curious Hair," by the widely acclaimed novelist David Foster Wallace, in order to study the way the handling of an unsympathetic narrator is managed—Wallace's protagonist is a nasty violence-inclined yuppie who calls himself Sick Puppy—before tackling such a character in their own fiction.

One member of the class, a young man from Seattle, proceeded to turn in a story called "A Complete Loss of Hope," a wild and gory thing filled with the sort of gratuitously repulsive stuff that, alas, we see in the newspapers every day: incest, pedophilia, sexual torture, dismemberment. Ms. Richman found the story very disturbing. So would I; so would you. It's no surprise that fiction about disturbing things can often be quite disturbing itself, especially in the hands of a beginner who doesn't quite know when to stop ladling out the blood and gore.

Well, San Francisco is the nation's capital of political correctness. Although you don't have to be politically correct to find pedophilia repugnant and torture nauseating, Ms. Richman was troubled enough by the content of the story to consult her departmental chairman about it. Did she feel that in some way *writing* about such things might be a prelude to *doing* such things? She hasn't said. The chairman looked the story over and suggested simply that its young author read the first chapter of Alice Sebold's novel *The Lovely Bones* to see how similarly grisly material could be dealt with in fiction in a less repellent way, one that would

have greater literary effect. That should have been where it ended: a useful lesson that often it can be more effective for a writer to handle over-the-top material in a less-than-over-the-top fashion.

Alas, it didn't end there. Word of the incident traveled upward at the Academy of Art University to the chairman of the liberal arts department, to the vice president of the university, and then to its president. Jan Richman was hauled before an administrative committee to explain why she had encouraged her pupils to indulge in such horrendous fictionalizing. Although the students had nothing but good words about her in the inquiry that followed, she was told to solicit character references from her fellow instructors as well. "Am I on trial?" she asked. "I need character witnesses now?"

Next the hapless young writer's story was turned over to the San Francisco Police Department. There it went first to the SFPD's Behavioral Sciences Unit, whose function is unknown to me. The Behavioral Sciences people tossed it to the Homicide Department, which sent a detective around to the dormitory to interview the unfortunate student about his taste for violence. "This was never an open homicide case," Homicide Inspector Holly Pera said. "We have no evidence that it was anything other than a story." Well, yes. But the next day the student was expelled and put on a plane to Seattle. And when Jan Richman returned from her Christmas break soon afterward, she discovered that she had lost her teaching job. No reason was given: she worked on a semester-by-semester basis, and the university had simply chosen not to rehire her for the new semester.

In the free-speech uproar that predictably followed in traditionally liberal San Francisco, the university stuck to its guns. It refused to explain Richman's dismissal, claiming a policy of prohibiting comment on "personnel matters." A spokesman added that the university believed in encouraging creativity, "but when there is a questionable or disturbing issue, we contact the proper authorities."

Some of the expelled student's classmates noted that he had often brought violent materials to class—Japanese animation stuff, particularly—and had shown a fondness for slasher movies and such grim fiction as Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho*. But no one thought that that in itself was grounds for expulsion. "He seemed like a normal kid with a normal life," said one student—a comment that I can't help find a little troublesome, considering my own non-fondness for slasher movies and the like. If those now are normal tastes, God help us all. But bad taste is not of itself illegal, so far as I know. As for the dismissed instructor, "She has totally been treated unfairly," another student said. "She was awesome, one of the best teachers I've had in the school."

The writer Alan Kaufman, a fellow member of the faculty who had read the condemned story, found it well written and told with power and originality. "You get a kid who did what that kid did, you should praise him to the skies. Instead they called the police on him." And David Foster Wallace, whose own short story had been the class assignment that started all the trouble, and who is himself a professor of creative writing at Pomona College in Southern California, called

the incident "a combination of moral spasms and legal terror," expressing his astonishment that the story, however disagreeable its content, could have brought such punishment to its author and even to the instructor in whose class it was written.

Not everyone agrees. Some students thought that the proper response to the story would have been to send the author off for "counseling"—as though writing about such things was a sign of regrettable mental imbalance. And the university itself has appeared to fall back on a belief that it has a responsibility to "protect" its students, even against the free play of the imagination, something that one might think an art school would want to encourage.

Mark you, I'm a squeamish sort of guy whose own fiction is discernibly free of extreme violence and who keeps his distance from books and movies that go in for flamboyantly gory effects. But that's a matter of personal preference—a private aversion that I would never want to see used as the foundation for public censorship.

And censorship is what this San Francisco episode, and all the other nice-nelly attacks on kids who like to write nasty stories, is all about. Those tremulous folks who decree the suspensions and expulsions might well be big fans of Quentin Tarantino and Stephen King themselves, but they want to clamp down on the free play of the imagination in the schools they run, I suspect, out of fear that some sort of legal liability will get attached to them if they don't. That sort of thinking leads ultimately to the kind of totalitarian measures that

Stalin's commissars of culture imposed on writers and even painters and composers whose work seemed to embody unhealthy and unconstructive ideas. A lot of those people wound up in Siberian prison camps, which certainly did teach others of their kind to keep their unhealthy and unconstructive ideas to themselves. When young people are taught similarly that what they think can land them in trouble, they will quickly conclude that thinking is a pastime too dangerous to indulge in. Is that, I wonder, the lesson that our schools ought to be teaching?

The distinction between fiction and reality is not one that should lightly be discarded. The little boy who points a finger at another student and cries "Bang!" is not actually shooting him. The student who writes a story about disemboweling the little girl next door is not actually disemboweling her. The

writer who tells a story about evil elder gods biding their time in a citadel beneath the sea while planning their attack on our civilization is not actually bringing down upon us the onslaught of Cthulhu and his nasty companions.

There *are* real dangers all around, ranging from the troubled kids in trenchcoats down the block who dream of mowing down their classmates with AK-47s, and may someday do it, to the bearded minions of al-Qaeda, hidden in remote caves, who are planning their next terrorist scheme even as I write this. We need all the help we can get to defend ourselves against perils such as these. But calling in the Homicide Department to protect us against youthful writers with excessively feverish imaginations achieves nothing at all to make us safer. It simply brings us a little closer to the fiercely constricted world of George Orwell's Big Brother. ○

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LETTERS

Dear *Asimov's Science Fiction*:

By now you're probably aware that a story was omitted from the 2004 index published in your January 2005 issue.

The missing story is William Sanders's "At Ten Wolf Lake," from the February 2004 issue.

I love *Asimov's Science Fiction*, and I'm delighted when a new issue arrives. In the January 2005 issue, I especially liked Susan Palwick's "The Fate of Mice." It inspired me to pull Daniel Keyes's "Flowers for Algernon" from my files and re-read it. Sincerely,

Alice Anderson
Las Cruces, NM

Thanks for pointing out our omission. We have corrected this oversight in both our online Readers' Award ballot (don't forget to vote next year!) and the 2004 online index.

Dear *Asimov's*,

In your January 2005 issue it was good of you to print Roger Ebert's piece from *The Best of "Xero"* (Tachyon Publications, 2004). He was himself among the best of *Xero*, which won the Hugo Award for best Fanzine at the World SF Convention in 1964. Fanzines were then, and are now, amateur publications by fans, for fans. I ran the Fanzine Lounge at the 2004 Worldcon. They flourish.

Some of today's fanzines are on the World Wide Web; I reviewed *The Best of "Xero"* in the October 2004 issue of the Hugo-winner *Emerald City*; some are on paper, though *Xero*

was before my time, folks who sent letters of comment to it have also sent letters of comment to my fanzine. And I am only one frog in the pond.

Without your prozines there might be no science fiction. Some joke that the Hugo Award for Best Novel is "the big one," but size may not matter; everyone knows that much of the best SF is in short forms, and published in prozines. Without fanzines—well, life would be duller.

Fanzines run little fiction; that is your work; but essays, drawings, reviews, letters, bad jokes; circulation of a few dozen to a few hundred; and as Shakespeare said, all for love.

We applaud you. Thanks for applauding us.

John F. Hertz
Los Angeles, CA

Dear Ms. Williams:

Congratulations on becoming the editor of *Asimov's*. I feel really good about a woman once again editing one of the major science fiction magazines. In the tradition of Cele Goldsmith and Kristine Kathryn Rusch, I look forward to the magazine blooming under your editorship.

I have been reading *Asimov's* since it was first published and for the last several years I have been a subscriber. I am a Marine Biologist and the mother of an eleven year old daughter, Gillian. I enjoy all types of SF but especially humanistic stories that show how realistically written people deal with advances of science.

I love the idea of articles on "the personal and public history of science fiction." I very much enjoyed Roger Ebert's essay. Keeping these articles occasional will insure their highest possible quality.

I would love to see the return of a letters column. I remember writing a few times after Dr. Asimov's death but, quite frankly, I did not think the letters were being read so I stopped writing.

I would love to see a monthly editorial from you. Kristine Rusch made an artform of her editorials. Each one was like having a cup of coffee with a close friend. A week might go by before I began to read the stories but her editorials were read ASAP.

JANUARY 2005 ISSUE

I use the four star (the best) system.

Bruce McAllister "Water Angel":

**** Beautifully written, deeply moving. I am not a woman given much to weeping but this story reduced me to tears. On my list for Hugo nominations.

Larry Niven "Rhinemaidens":

*** and a half. Great story, nice ambiance. Told from the point of view of the Merwoman would have been more interesting, but I digress.

Susan Palwick "The Fate of Mice":

*** Nice combination of pathos and humor.

Phillip C. Jennings "Invasion of the Axbeaks":

** and a half. Clever satire with enough of a plot to support it.

Matthew Jarpe "City of Reason":

** Routine space opera, cardboard characters, borderline boring.

Connie Willis "Inside Job":

* This is a one-joke story with elephantiasis. Even if I enjoyed the joke (I did not) repeating it over and over would not have made it any funnier.

Might have worked at twenty pages, at sixty it collapsed under its own weight. The one star is for the clever writing style, otherwise I would not have finished it.

Rebekah Memel Brown
Salem, MA

We're glad to bring the letters column back and we hope that more of our readers will write letters of comment regarding our stories, poems, and features.

Dear Sheila,

I've been an on and off (mostly on) subscriber to *Asimov's* ever since the early eighties when I bought a subscription to it from my stepdaughter, who was selling magazine subscriptions at her elementary school class.

I have been a fan of science fiction since my mother read to me, as a child, at bedtime from a science fiction book about exploring Mars. Then, I saw several SF movies in the 1950s about exploring space, and Mars. These subjects always fascinated me!

But, there have been a few things I have seen in *Asimov's* over the years that I don't like. The biggest one is the dropping of story illustrations. I always enjoyed seeing almost every story with its own artwork at the beginning. It would set the mood for the story, and give me some idea of what it was about. I wish you would bring them back! Excluding illustrations probably saves a lot of money, but your pages are dull without them!

Then, there was your dropping of the letters column. I was going to write about this sooner, but I figured, "What's the use?" since you had no place for opinions to appear! But, reading your column in the January 2005 issue gave me hope

that it might be brought back! Please do! It lets *Asimov's* readers know what other readers like and don't like about the magazine!

Lastly, since I'm a Christian, I don't like the profanity and immortality that some writers insist on using in their stories and columns. For example, in his column about a year ago, Robert Silverberg nonchalantly used the "GD" word. This was very offensive to me! At least you have some warnings at the beginnings of some of these types of stories!

Keep up the good work.

Tom Robbins
Spruce Pine, NE

As you can see, the letters column is back. Reader letters will ensure that it stays permanently. The dropping of the illustrations was an unfortunate budget decision, though the upside is that we are able to include more fiction each month.

Dear Sheila,

While reading Roger Ebert's essay in the inaugural Thought Experiments column (January 2005) just days after our most recent national election, I wondered if fandom had stopped being so subversive after all. The American Catholicism of the 1950s has at last, a half century later, an equal in the American Conservatism of the 2000s. Roger wrote that today's children do have many more ways to connect with "alterna-

tive ideas, other worlds to explore." Yet if you define alternative as "allowing a choice," it astounds me how many alternative ideas—which fans like myself who grew up in the sixties just assumed would be part of the brave, inclusive future of the twenty-first century—are still so far from the "Red State" mainstream that they may as well be from a different planet. If an alien were to land in this country today, what reception might he or she expect to receive, knowing that a majority of our electorate cannot even tolerate differences among our own species?

So I salute subversive fandom, and publications such as *Asimov's*, which offer dangerous visions of alternative cultures, distant worlds, and even occasional glimpses of those most alien beings: lawyers, homosexuals, and liberals.

Chris Lightfoot
Seattle, WA

To the Editor of *Asimov's*:

As one of the ones who has a copy of the Spring 1977 issue of *Asimov's* and all of the issues thereafter, I want to welcome Sheila Williams as the new editor. Her inaugural issue was outstanding and I look forward to many more. Each editor puts his or her stamp on the magazine and it will be interesting to see what Ms. Williams brings in the way of new writers and departments.

Peggy C. Hart

We welcome your letters, which should be sent to *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 475 Park Avenue South, Floor 11, New York, NY 10016-6901, or e-mailed to asimovs@delmagazines.com. Please include your mailing address, even if you use email. This email address is for editorial correspondence *only*—please direct all subscription inquiries to: 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. We're looking forward to hearing from you!

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THE ROBOTS WE WANT: A REAL-LIFE SUSAN CALVIN AND HER ROBOTIC VACUUM CLEANER

It's time we admitted to ourselves that most of us don't really want robots. At least, not robots as they exist now—expensive and almost useless, able only to amble across the room, pretend to be a dog, or pummel another robot in gladiatorial combat.

No, the majority of consumers don't want or need a fancy wind-up toy. What we want is a robot that can do the stuff we can't find time for, the stuff we find unpleasant. Those in search of mechanized entertainment can keep their pricey Sony AIBOs and Lego Mindstorms—the rest of us want a cheap robot who will cook for us, bring in the mail, and clean our houses.

If the purpose of a personal robot is to perform tasks we don't want to handle, it seems odd that so much robot research is being directed toward making them seem human. I don't like to mow the lawn; a humanoid robot doing it for me would just make me feel guilty. And it turns out the human form isn't particularly practical for robots, anyway. The Japanese robot SDR-3X is a bipedal machine with a head, arms, and torso. It can toddle around and look vaguely like a person, but what's the use? It can't even vacuum the floor.

Enter . . . Roomba.

By now, we all know about the Roomba, first in a line of commercial robots developed by a Massachusetts company called iRobot. Roomba is a mass-marketed per-

sonal robot, available for under \$250, that scoots around a room, avoiding obstacles, and sucking up debris. Set it, forget it, and come home to sparkling floors—so say the marketing claims.

So far, half a million of them have been sold. While it may not have the flash of the Jetsons' maid Rosie, the Roomba is the first successful consumer robot.

Of course, some users find Roomba more effective than others, and skimming online forums devoted to the topic reveals that the glitches aren't entirely worked out. The little, disc-shaped 'bot can get clogged pretty quickly, and it sometimes can't tell the family pet from a wall. "Sensitive electronics + floor cleaning = hassle, hassle, hassle," laments one user.

"Roomba rocks!" rave others. But love it or hate it, the Roomba is not quite what most of us think of as a real robot . . . yet.

The future looks bright for iRobot, which was founded by two graduates from the MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory. They're also developing government and industrial robots to do unpleasant or dangerous tasks, such as mine-sweeping, hazardous materials sampling, and confined space investigations.

The company got a lot of attention when its sturdy, tracked 'bots were used at the World Trade Center site to search for survivors. Backpack models have been deployed in

Afghanistan and Iraq to sniff out explosives and mines. Some of the concept robots on iRobot's website are a bit scary looking, and their functions seem suited for a fearful world that needs expendable, anthrax-sniffing machines.

Back on the home front, most of us just need a good vacuum cleaner. And although it does not detect poison gas, the latest-model Roomba does sport something called "dirt detection" technology. When particles are being vacuumed up, sound transducers send a signal so Roomba "knows" to stay on that spot until it's clean.

iRobot's company name, of course, is a reflection of one of the great literary works about robots. Helen Greiner, chair and cofounder of iRobot, was thrilled by the works of Isaac Asimov when she read his stories in high school. For her robotics company, she wanted a name that would work on different levels. "The name comes from this incredible science fiction source, the guy who brought robots to popular imagination. The 'i' in the name can stand for 'intelligent,' as well."

As a roboticist, Greiner is a woman in a seemingly male-dominated field, but, she notes, "There are more women roboticists than you might think. Many of them came out of MIT. There was this cluster of women roboticists there working on cooperating robots, on how babies learn, on swarms of robots, on what happens when robots get very small."

The MIT lab "really encouraged people to do their own thing," Greiner says. For her, that was figuring out how to make a cheap, practical robot to sell.

"I was interested in business. I might have been the only one," she

laughs. She especially appreciates that the stories in Asimov's *I, Robot* are built around the products of a single company, US Robotics and Mechanical Men.

Greiner is a sort of real-life Susan Calvin, the female protagonist of many of Asimov's robot stories, when she talks about robots. "They can do things with less effort, safer, and in many cases even better than a human could do. . . . Once you get the first practical device on the market, there will be the technology to start developing the next generation. . . . I'm a believer."

While the Roomba still doesn't have a positronic brain, it does have some sophisticated circuits, and Greiner hopes that each new model of the robotic vacuum cleaner gets a little better at doing its chore. She clearly understands that most of us can't afford and don't want another expensive toy.

"It's not a toy, not a high-tech thing. It's just a practical thing. We finally got a robot out there that was at consumer prices and got a job done. Think of window washing, toilet cleaning, bathtub scrubbing. We're not a vacuum company, we're a robotics company, and all these tasks are opportunities for development."

But even if we only think of our robots as chore-machines, we still want to love them. Roomba owners come to think of their little 'bots as pets, or even something more . . . anthropomorphic. Roombas hum around the room, making self-satisfied noises, then scoot back into their recharging stations when they need a break. They seem at least as smart as a cat.

Helen Greiner has heard from many happy customers whose feel-

ings toward their robot changed after they spent time with it. "People think it's an appliance when they buy it. But when they get it home, the only thing they've seen that works like it is a creature. So they name it and start to feel affection for it."

I wonder if this affection is a side-effect of the Roomba's small, unobtrusive shape. It's low enough to get under furniture and it's round to maximize mobility through tight spaces. For some reason, when it's moving around, many users find it "cute." It's almost like having a fast-moving limpet in the house. You can't imagine it hurting you—although your cat may feel differently about it. On the other hand, some walking robots being developed now look more like big spiders.

Note to the robotics industry: we don't like big spiders.

Helen Greiner doesn't share my uneasiness about walking robots, although she isn't a biped purist. "Legs are great over rough terrain. I enjoy having legs, but there's a reason I jump on a bicycle or get in a car sometimes."

"I'm a legged robot person by background. I do believe there are a lot of good things about legs, but you've got to be practical. We don't have the strength-to-weight ratio yet. People say robots have to have legs to climb stairs—that's just not true," she says.

Greiner believes that robots with very sophisticated bodies and brains are on the horizon. "I think we will get there," she says.

But do we want to get there? As such devices become more commonplace, smarter, and more self-motivated, household robots may be our pets, or they may be involuntary laborers.

In fact, setting aside stories of machines running amok, robots have been portrayed as benign, mechanical helpers almost since science fiction began. From Robbie to C-3PO, they are intelligent, friendly, and always willing to do our bidding. Far from representing the terrifying rise of automatons, they function merely as wish-fulfilling servants. The literary and cinematic robots that garner the most adoration and affection are those who do the dirty work without complaint, or with a little charming sass. Would you—could you—make R2-D2 vacuum your rug if he didn't want to?

Science fiction authors, including the inestimable Asimov, have dealt with the issues of robot exploitation in many ways. Robots reflect our feelings about the mindless production work that seems inherent to capitalism, and at the same time, they play on our fears of being replaced by automated workers.

Human reactions to technology have always been complex, but never more so than when the lines between brains and circuits become blurred. Conflicted emotions about Pinocchio-like androids provide much fodder for science fiction, as in Brian Aldiss's "Super-toys Last All Summer Long" and the uneven Steven Spielberg film based on it, *A.I.*

The uneasy relationships between people and their mechanical counterparts were doubtless what inspired Isaac Asimov to come up with the Three Laws of Robotics, which gave robots a moral code in relation to humans. Will we see something like the Three Laws programmed into robots someday? Nope, says Helen Greiner. "Asimov was writing those stories in the for-

ties. The understanding of the difficulty of programming was not there."

"But we're getting to parts of the Three Laws in other ways," she continues. "The Roomba won't fall down stairs . . . but does it know it's keeping itself safe?"

Greiner and other roboticists see robotic "psychology" questions, as well as more practical concerns, as intriguing challenges to tackle. "Working in this field teaches you stuff about being human and how difficult some things we take for granted are."

Things like cooking dinner. Programming a small robot to vacuum a room is one thing, but where on-the-fly decisions about what I eat must be made, give me gray matter any day. It's possible that there are some chores not suited for robots.

Helen Greiner and iRobot, along with the emerging competitors in this nascent market, are working to find out what robots can do for us. Greiner says American markets, unlike those in the Far East, respond more to practical uses of robots as opposed to entertainment uses. But she is also quick to mention that Roomba has become a favorite of robot tinkerers, because of its low price and varied capabilities.

Roomba's programmed code is not open source, but robot hobbyists can modify its collision and detection sensor settings, mount things on its chassis, and make it do all kinds of things that will no doubt void the warranty.

When speculating about what people might modify their Roombas to do, Greiner jokingly suggested that someone might program one to bring beers to its owner. Well, there goes the "real-life Susan Calvin" theory. It seems likely

that Asimov's serious heroine would have considered such a task demeaning to her beloved robots.

I ask Greiner if she agrees with Susan Calvin that robots are easier to get along with than humans. "Loaded question!" she deflects with a laugh.

Obviously, robots as they currently exist are as easy—and as hard—to get along with as a car, or a coffee maker. They don't yet have real personalities, or the ability to respond to human emotional cues or subtle variations in their environments. They are implacable and steadfast doers of chores.

Or are they?

How many science fiction horror films do we need to see to understand we can't trust robots? No matter how cute and helpful they are, at some point, their "dirt detection" sensors will glow blood-red, and they will leave their charging stations, creep across the bedroom toward our sleeping forms, and exact revenge for all the dog hair they've had to swallow.

It could happen. ○

Therese Littleton is a full-time museum curator and part-time writer living in Seattle. Her work has appeared in Amazing Stories, The Seattle Times, SciFi Magazine, The New York Times, and SF Weekly.

BREATHING THE BLOGOSPHERE

courting obsolescence

It took me years to write this one. You see, as your internet print columnist, the astonishing growth of the blogosphere has intimidated me. Every time I sit down to type a new installment, I can feel the pressure of tens of millions of fingers curled over keyboards across the world. Bloggers do pretty much the same thing I do, only they do more, more, *more*. Their writing is *more* timely, they visit way *more* sites and there are way, way *more* of them than there are of me. Millions more, as a matter of fact. As I write this in the early fall of 2004, **Technorati** <<http://www.technorati.com>>, a site that aspires to be the **Google** <<http://www.google.com>> of the blogosphere, is tracking over four million blogs. Of course, I can't possibly point you toward four million blogs or four thousand or even four hundred. But I'm worried that if I point you toward, say, forty excellent blogs that explore our little corner of literature, then this column might well become obsolete, nothing more than a speed bump on the way from **Robert Silverberg's** <<http://www.majipoor.com>> Reflections to the first gripping yarn of the month.

Sure, go ahead, Jim. Cut your own throat.

The thing is, when I took this gig

in 1998, there weren't very many blogs. In fact, the term *weblog* had just recently been coined by one **Jorn Barger** <<http://www.robotwisdom.com>> the previous year. And even by early 1999, when **Peter Merholz** <<http://www.peterme.com/archives/00000205.html>> decided to shorten Barger's neologism to *blog*, there probably weren't more than a couple or three dozen of the things. But later that year saw the coming of **Blogger** <<http://www.blogger.com>> and **LiveJournal** <<http://www.livejournal.com>>, two of the first dedicated blog-publishing tools. Instead of coding each entry in HTML, users could submit posts just by filling forms on a website. Even Ten Thumb Tom and your future-shocked Grandma could manage that! Shortly thereafter, *blog* became a verb (as in to blog, that is to post to a weblog). By the turn of the century, blogging had become a new social phenomenon.

For a more detailed history of blogging, check out the entry in the ever-reliable **Wikipedia** <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>> or pioneer **Rebecca Blood's** <<http://www.rebeccablood.net>> thoughtful essay, **weblogs: a history and perspective** <http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html>. And to put our modern movement into historical perspective, nip over to **Blogumentary**

<<http://blogumentary.typepad.com>> and watch **Chuck Olsen's** <<http://blogumentary.typepad.com/about.html>> diverting QuickTime tour of blogging <http://blogumentary.typepad.com/chuck/2004/09/blog_history.html> in which he argues that the first blogger was **Samuel Pepys** <<http://www.pepysdiary.com>> and that Founding Fathers **Thomas Paine** <<http://www.us.history.org/paine>> and **Samuel Adams** <<http://www.lucidcafe.com/library/95sep/adams.html>> were the literary progenitors of the pundits of Blogistan.

forty

So, forty blogs, as promised. My selection criteria? Just that the posts be interesting, regularly updated and touch on genre, at least occasionally.

1. **John Joseph Adams** <<http://www.tuginet.com/jja/journal>> The Slush God Speaketh ...

2. **Barth Anderson** <<http://www.barthanderson.com/wordblog>> on fatherhood, writing, food, and what not.

3. **Chris Barzak** <<http://zakbar.blogspot.com>> Meditations in an Emergency

4. **Elizabeth Bear** <<http://matociquala.livejournal.com>> turns steel into peanut brittle

5. **Gwenda Bond** <<http://bondgirl.blogspot.com>> shaken & stirred

6. **Tobias S. Buckell Online** <<http://www.tobiasbuckell.com/weblog.html>> Walking The Thin Line Between Insomnia and Insanity Online Since 1998

7. **Suzy McKee Charnas** <<http://www.livejournal.com/users/suzych>> Suzy Says

8. **Matt Cheney** <[\[mumpsimus.blogspot.com\]\(http://mumpsimus.blogspot.com\)> The Mumpsimus](http://</p>
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9. **Kathryn Cramer** <<http://www.kathryncramer.com/wblog>> lives in Pleasantville, NY

10. **Alan DeNiro** <<http://ptarmigan.blogspot.com>> Ptarmigan

11. **Cory Doctorow, Mark Frauenfelder, David Pescovitz, Xeni Jardin, John Battelle** <<http://boingboing.net>> Boing Boing—A Directory of Wonderful Things

12. **Neil Gaiman** <<http://www.neilgaiman.com/journal/journal.asp>> Journal

13. **David Gerrold** <<http://www.gerrold.com/soup/page.htm>> Bottomless Soup

14. **Jed Hartman** <<http://www.kith.org/logos/journal>> Lorem Ipsum

15. **Patrick Nielsen Hayden** <<http://www.nielsenhayden.com/electrolite>> Electrolite—Growing luminous by eating light

16. **Teresa Nielsen Hayden** <<http://nielsenhayden.com/makinglight>> Making Light—Language, fraud, folly, truth, history, and knitting. Et cetera.

17. **Nalo Hopkinson** <<http://www.sff.net/people/nalo/writing/naloblogger.html>> an intermittent web diary pertaining to my writing life ...

18. **Michael Jasper** <<http://www.journalscape.com/mjjwrecked>> Journal

19. **JP and Jon** <<http://www.sfsignal.com>> No last names given SFSignal

20. **Mark R. Kelly** <<http://locusmag.blogspot.com>> Views from Medina Road

21. **Claude Lalumière** <<http://lostpagesfoundpages.blogspot.com>> Lost Pages | Found Pages—Readings, writings, and other despatch-

es from author/editor Claude Lalumière

22. **Justine Larbalestier** <<http://www.justinelarbalestier.com/Musings/muse.htm>> Musings, Rants, and Essays

23. **Alan Lattimore** <<http://www.alattimore.com/bin/geeklog>> FutureTense

24. **Chris Lawson** <<http://members.ozemail.com.au/~claw/frankenblogger.htm>> Frankenstein Journal

25. **Marissa Lingen** <<http://www.marissalingen.com/gazing.html>> Novel Gazing

26. **Jeremy Lyon, Christopher East, Judith Berman, Tobias S. Buckell, Alan Lattimore, Brian Wanamaker** <<http://futurismic.com>> Futurismic

27. **David Moles** <<http://www.chrononaut.org/log>> Chrononautic Log

28. **Ken MacLeod** <<http://www.kenmacleod.blogspot.com>> The Early Days of a Better Nation

29. **Nick Mamatas** <http://www.livejournal.com/users/nihilistic_kid> Nick Mamatas' Journal

30. **Cheryl Morgan** <<http://www.cheryl-morgan.com/blog/blogger.html>> Cheryl's Mewsings

31. **Derryl Murphy** <http://coldground.typepad.com/cold_ground> Cold Ground

32. **Tim Pratt** <<http://www.journalscape.com/tim>> Tropism, Tim Pratt's Journal

33. **Jenn Reese** <<http://www.journalscape.com/jenn>> Memory and Reason

34. **Benjamin Rosenbaum** <<http://www.benjaminrosenbaum.com/blog>> Journal

35. **John Scalzi** <<http://www.scalzi.com/whatever>> Whatever—Since 1998, your source for John Scalzi's Internet rantings

36. **Jonathan Strahan** <<http://notesfromcoodestreet.blogspot.com>> More Notes from Coode Street

37. **Bruce Sterling** <<http://blog.wired.com/sterling>> Beyond the Beyond

38. **Charles Stross** <<http://public.antipope.org/charlie/blosxom.cgi>> Charlie's Diary

39. **Jeff VanderMeer** <<http://vanderworld.blogspot.com>> VanderWorld—A blog about the writing life, with short observations, essays, and recommendations

40. **Greg van Eekhout** <<http://www.journalscape.com/greg>> Writing and Snacks

exit

I suppose I could review the blogs on my list, but I won't. Discussing someone's blog is even more personal than talking about their website. For the most part, there is little ironic distance between author and text in a blog. These are passionate people expressing themselves from the heart. Pointing out that SkiffyGuy has a tendency to whine or that GothGrrl needs to lay off the latte before she touches the keyboard is like critiquing someone's comb-over or making fun of an accent.

Instead, let me offer some general comments. The first is that I suspect I've missed some fine work. My list is by no means scientific; it merely includes blogs I read from time to time. A few I check regularly, like Boing Boing and Futurismic, Bruce Sterling and Matt Cheney, to name just four. Most I read in fits and spurts. Many turn up in searches and beguile me into an idle half hour or so. I should mention here that in addition to Tech-

norati, **Bloglines** <<http://bloglines.com>> and **Feedster** <<http://www.feedster.com>> are sites I use regularly to sample conditions in the blogosphere. Interestingly enough, each of the three seems to turn up hits that the others miss.

In my sample there are more men than women bloggers and more new faces than old. I wouldn't make too much of the former, since it probably reflects a well-known genre demographic, but I'm intrigued that so many younger writers, editors, critics, and fans have embraced blogging. My hunch is that blogs and bulletin boards like **Night Shade** <<http://www.nightshadebooks.com/discus>> are fast becoming the new public forums of the genre, replacing the print 'zines of old: fanzines, personalzines, reviewzines, and criticalzines. And the Hugo for the Best Blog of 2009 goes to . . .

What are our bloggers blogging about? Well, they aren't just writing about spaceships and robots, that's for sure. One thing that strikes me is how concerned with politics they are. Of course, the election is less

than a month away as I write this, but even excavating the archives turns up great steaming clumps of political rant. In addition there are lots of pointers to important news items, many of which have been grossly underplayed in the mainstream media. Elsewhere you'll find geek speak of all stripes, as folks trade opinions of the latest gizmos, cutting edge software, hot games, comics, and music. And yes, look for plenty of new URLs to click—or avoid at all costs.

Meanwhile the quotidian life of our community is here for all to see. Skiffy folks dine out and diet, own dogs, cats, snakes, and turtles, get sick and buy cars, get along with their moms (at long last), and are too often late for work, break up, make up, make out, and have the cutest kids you've ever seen. No, really!

For good or whatever, know that blogs are here. Resistance is futile. Hey, maybe if I can convince all of you out there in Readerland that this column is actually a kind of retroblog, you'll give me another chance! ○



SOLIDARITY

Walter Jon Williams

"Solidarity" features Sula/Gredel, the protagonist first introduced in "Margaux" (Asimov's, May 2003), and takes place in the same future as the author's novels *The Praxis*, *The Sundering*, and the forthcoming *Conventions of War* (Harper Torch). Familiarity with any of the previous works is not necessary for enjoyment of this riveting story.

Sula dressed in fine Riverside low style for her meeting with Casimir. A bright tight-waisted jacket with fractal patterns, overhung by the wide, floppy collar of her blouse. Pants belled out around platform shoes. Cheap colorful plastic or ceramic jewelry. A tall velvet hat, crushed just so, with one side of the brim held up by a gold pin with an artificial diamond the size of a walnut.

"I don't like this," Macnamara said.

Sula peered at herself in the mirror, flipped her fingers through her dyed black hair.

"I wish there were other choices," she said, "but there aren't."

"My lady—" he began.

She turned to him.

"I'm going," she said. "We need allies."

And, because he was under military discipline, he said nothing more, just glowered in his petulant way.

The neighborhood known as Riverside was still, and the pavement radiated the heat of the day as if it were exhaling a long, hot breath. Between bars of light, the long shadows of buildings striped the street like prison bars. She saw no sign of Naxid or police patrols.

The Cat Street club was nearly deserted, inhabited only by a few people knocking back drinks on their way home from, or on their way to, their work. The hostess said that Casimir wasn't in yet. Sula sat at a back table and ordered sparkling water and transformed the table top into a video screen so that she could watch a news program, the usual expressionless Daimong announcer with the usual bland tidings, all about the happy, contented people of many species who worked productively and happily under their new Naxid overlords.

She didn't see Casimir arrive: there was only the hostess coming to her and saying that he was in. The hostess escorted Sula to the back of the club, up a staircase of black iron, and to a door glossy with polished black

ceramic. Sula looked at her reflection in the door's lustrous surface and adjusted the tilt of her hat.

The next room featured a pair of Torminel guards, fierce in their gray fur and white fangs, and Sula concluded that Casimir must be nervous. Lamey had never gone around with guards, not until the very end, when the Legion of Diligence was after him.

The guards patted Sula down—she had left her pistol at home—and scanned her with a matte-black polycarbon wand intended to detect any listening devices. Then they waved her through another polished door to Casimir in his suite.

The suite was large and decorated in black and white, from the diamond-shaped floor tiles to the onyx pillars that supported a series of white marble Romanesque arches, impressive but non-structural, intended purely for decoration. The chairs featured cushions so soft they might tempt a sitter to sprawl. There was a video wall that enabled Casimir to watch the interior of the club, and several different scenes played there in silence. Sula saw that one of the cameras was focused on the table she'd just left.

"Were you watching me?" she asked.

"I hadn't seen you around," Casimir said. "I was curious."

He had come around his desk to greet her. He was a plain-featured young man a few years older than Sula, with longish dark hair combed across his forehead and tangled down his collar behind. He wore a charcoal-gray velvet jacket over a purple silk shirt, with gleaming black boots beneath fashionably wide-bottomed trousers. His hands were long and pale and delicate, with fragile-seeming wrists; the hands were posed self-consciously in front of his chest, the fingers tangled in a kind of knot. His voice was surprisingly deep and full of gravel, like a sudden flood over stony land.

She felt the heat of his dark eyes and knew at once that danger smoldered there, possibly for Sula, possibly for himself, possibly for the whole world. Possibly he himself didn't know; he would strike out at first one, then the other, as the mood struck him.

Sula felt a chord of danger chime deep in her nerves, and it was all she could do to keep her blood from thundering an answer.

"I'm new," she said. "I came down from the ring a few months ago, before they blew it up."

"Are you looking for work?" He tilted his head and affected to consider her. "For someone as attractive as you, I suppose something could be found."

"I already have work," Sula said. "What I'd like is steady pay." She took from an inner pocket of her vest a pair of identity cards, and offered them.

"What's this?" Casimir approached and took the cards. His eyes widened as he saw his own picture on both cards, each of which identified him as "Michael Saltillo."

"One's the primary identity," Sula said, "and the other's the special card that gets you up to the High City."

Casimir frowned, took the cards back to his desk, and held them up to the light. "Good work," he said. "Did you do these?"

"The government did them," Sula said. "They're genuine."

He pursed his lips and nodded. "You work in the Records Office?"

"No," Sula lied. "But I know someone who does."

He gave her a heavy-lidded look. "You'll have to tell me who that is."

Sula shook her head. "No. I can't."

He glided toward her. Menace flowed off him like an inky rain. "I'll need that name," he said.

She looked up at him and willed her muscles not to tremble beneath the tide of adrenaline that flooded her veins. "First," Sula said, speaking softly to keep a tremor from her voice, "she wouldn't work with you. Second—"

"I'm *very persuasive*," Casimir said. The deep, grating words seemed to rise from the earth. His humid breath warmed her cheek.

"Second," Sula continued, calmly as she could, "she doesn't live in Zanshaa, and if you turn up on her doorstep she'll call the police and turn you in. You don't have any protection where she is, no leverage at all."

A muscle pulsed in one half-lowered eyelid: Casimir didn't like being contradicted. Sula prepared herself for violence and wondered how she would deal with the Torminel.

"I don't believe I got your name," Casimir said.

She looked into the half-lidded eyes. "Gredel," she said.

He turned, took a step away, then swung back and with an abrupt motion thrust out the identity cards.

"Take these," he said. "I'm not going to have them off someone I don't know. I could be killed for having them in my office."

Sula made certain her fingers weren't trembling before she took the cards. "You'll need them sooner or later," she said, "the way things are going under the Naxids."

She could see that he didn't like hearing that, either. He turned again and walked to the far side of his desk and stood there with his head down, his long fingers tidying papers.

"There's nothing I can do about the Naxids," he said.

"You can kill them," Sula said, "before they kill you."

He kept his eyes on his papers, but a smile touched his lips. "There are a lot more Naxids than there are of me."

"Start at the top and work your way down," Sula advised. "Sooner or later you'll reach equilibrium."

The smile still played about his lips. "You're quite the provocateur, aren't you?" he said.

"It's fifty for primary ID. Two hundred for the special pass to the High City."

He looked up at her in surprise. "*Two* hundred?"

"Most people won't need it. But the ones who'll need it will really need it."

His lips gave a sardonic twist. "Who would want to go to the High City now?"

"People who want to work for Naxids. Or steal from Naxids. Or kill Naxids." She smiled. "Actually, that last category gets the cards free."

He turned his head slightly to hide a grin. "You're a pistol, aren't you?"

Sula said nothing. Casimir stood for a moment in thought, then suddenly threw himself into his chair in a whoof of deflating cushions and surprised hydraulics. He put his feet on his desk, one gleaming boot crossed over the other.

"Can I see you again?" he said.

"To do what? Talk business? We can talk business *now*."

"Business, certainly," he said with an nod. "But I was thinking we could mainly entertain ourselves."

"Do you still think I'm a provocateur?"

He grinned and shook his head. "The police under the Naxids don't have to bother with evidence anymore. Provocateurs are looking for work like everyone else."

"Yes," Sula said.

He blinked. "Yes what?"

"Yes. You can see me."

His grin broadened. He had even teeth, brilliantly white. His dentist was to be congratulated.

"I'll give you my comm code. Set your display to receive."

They activated their sleeve displays, and Sula broadcast her electronic address. It was one she'd created strictly for this meeting, along with another of what were proving to be a dizzying series of false identities.

"See you then." Sula walked for the door, then stopped. "By the way," she said. "I'm also in the delivery business. If you need something moved from one place to another, let me know." She permitted herself a smile. "We have very good documents," she said. "We can move things wherever you need them."

She left, then, before glee got the better of her.

Once outside on the hot, dark streets, she used evasion procedures to make certain she wasn't followed home.

Casimir called after midnight. Sula groped her way from her bed to where she'd hung her blouse and told the sleeve to answer.

The chameleon fabric showed Casimir with a slapdash grin pasted to his face. There was blaring music in the background and the sound of laughter.

"Hey Gredel!" he said. "Come have some fun!"

Sula swiped sleep from her eyes. "I'm asleep. Call me tomorrow."

"Wake up! It's still early!"

"I work for a living! Call me tomorrow!"

As she told the sleeve to end her transmission and made her way back to the bed, she decided that she'd done a good job setting the hook.

The next day she had deliveries in the High City, the cocoa and tobacco and coffee that Sula had spent her modest fortune acquiring when she found out that Zanshaa's ring was going to be destroyed, and that there wouldn't be imports of anything for a long time. At each stop she talked to business owners and employees, a task which came under the heading of "intelligence gathering" even though there was no one left to report the intelligence *to*—all her superiors had been captured and tortured to death, their torments broadcast live to the planet as a lesson to anyone

tempted by the idea of loyalty to the old regime. Sula survived by way of bombing her own apartment as the Naxid police crashed down the door, and then used her back door into the Records Office computer to give herself and her team clean identities.

Sula returned to her apartment weary and sweat-stained. Gredel's comm unit showed that Casimir had logged three calls asking her out for the night. She took a long, delicious bath in lilac-scented water while considering an answer, then picked up the comm, turned off the camera button that would transmit her image, then returned the last call.

"Why not?" she said at the sullen face that answered. "Unless you've made other plans, of course."

The sulky look vanished as Casimir peered into his sleeve display in failed search for an image. "Is this Gredel?" he asked. "Why can't I see you?"

"I'm in the tub."

A sly look crossed his features. "I could use a wash myself. How about I join you?"

"I'll meet you at the club," Sula said. "Just tell me what time."

He told her. Sula would have time to luxuriate in her bath for a while longer and then to nap for a couple of hours before joining him.

"How should I dress?" Sula asked.

"What you're wearing now is fine."

"Ha ha. Will I be all right in the sort of thing I wore last night?"

"Yes. That'll do."

"See you then."

She ended the call, then ordered the hot water tap to open. The bathroom audio pickup wasn't reliable and she had to lean forward to open the tap manually. As the hot water raced from the tap and the steam rose, she sank into the tub and closed her eyes. She allowed herself to slowly relax, to let the scent of lilacs rise in her senses.

The day had started well. She thought it would only get better.

Sula adjusted her jacket as she gazed out the window of the apartment she shared with Macnamara and Spence, the two members of her team. Because of electricity shortages, only every third street lamp was lit. Most businesses were closed, and those remaining open had turned off their signs. The last of the street vendors were closing their stalls or driving away in their little three-wheeled vehicles with their business packed on the back. The near-blackout imposed by the Naxids—not to mention the hostage-taking, and the roundups that took place in public areas—had severely impacted their business, and there weren't enough people on the streets after dark to keep them at their work.

"I should be with you," Macnamara argued. He was a tall young man, a bushy-haired recruit who had been the star of the Fleet's combat course. He was from a mountain village on a backwater planet, and war was his way of seeing the worlds.

"You should be with me on a *date*?" Sula laughed.

Macnamara pushed out his lips like a pouting child. "You know what he is, my lady," he said. "It's not safe."

Sula fluffed her black-dyed hair with her fingers. "He's a necessary evil. I know how to deal with him."

Macnamara made a scornful sound in his throat. Sula looked at Spence, who sat on the sofa and was doing her best to look as if she weren't hearing this.

Shawna Spence was a petty officer and an engineer and good at things like bombs, though her chief contribution to the war effort so far was to blow up her own apartment.

"Can it, Macnamara," she said.

Macnamara ignored her and spoke to Sula. "He's a criminal. He may be a killer for all you know."

He probably hasn't killed nearly as many people as I have, Sula thought. She remembered five Naxid ships turning to sheets of brilliant white eye-piercing light at Magaria.

She turned from the window and faced him. "Say that you want to start a business," she said, "and you don't have the money. What do you do?"

Macnamara's face filled with suspicion, as if he knew Sula was luring him into a trap. "Go to my clan head," he said.

"And if your clan head won't help you?" Sula asked.

"I go to someone in his patron clan," Macnamara said. "A Peer or somebody."

Sula nodded. "What if the Peer's nephew is engaged in the same business and doesn't want the competition?"

Macnamara made the pouting face again. "I wouldn't go to Casimir, that's for sure."

"Maybe you wouldn't. But a lot of people *do* go to people like Casimir, and they get their business started, and Casimir offers protection against retaliation by the Peer's nephew and his clan. And in return Casimir gets fifty or a hundred percent interest on his money and a client who will maybe do him other favors."

Macnamara looked as if he'd bitten into a lemon. "And if they don't pay the hundred percent interest they get killed."

Sula considered this. "Probably not," she judged, "unless they try to cheat Casimir in some way. Most likely Casimir just takes over the business and every minim of assets and hands the business over to another client to run, leaving the borrower on the streets and loaded with debt." As Macnamara looked about to protest again, Sula held out her hands. "I'm not saying he's a pillar of virtue. He's in it for the money and the power. He hurts people, I'm sure. But in a system like ours, where the Peers have all the money and all the law on their side, people like the Riverside Clique are necessary."

"I don't get it," Macnamara said. "You're a Peer yourself, but you talk against the Peers."

"Oh." She shrugged. "There are Peers who make Casimir look like a blundering amateur."

The late Lord and Lady Sula, for two.

She told the video wall to turn on its camera and examined herself in its screen. She put on the crumpled velvet hat and adjusted it to the proper angle.

There. That was raffish enough, if you ignored the searching, critical look in the eyes.

"I'm going with you," Macnamara insisted. "The streets aren't safe."

Sula sighed and decided she might as well concede. "Very well," she said. "You can follow me to the club a hundred paces behind, but once I go in the door I don't want to see you for the rest of the evening."

"Yes," he said, and then added, "my lady."

She wondered if Macnamara's protectiveness was actually possessiveness, if there was something emotional or sexual in the way he related to her.

She supposed there was. There was with most men in her experience, so why not Macnamara?

Sula hoped she wouldn't have to get stern with him.

He followed her like an obedient, heavily armed ghost down the darkened streets to the Cat Street club. Yellow light spilled out from the doors, along with music and laughter and the taste of tobacco. She cast a look over her shoulder at Macnamara, one that warned him to come no further, and then she hopped up the step onto the black-and-silver tiles and swept through the doors, giving a nod to the two bouncers.

Casimir waited in his office, along with two others. He wore an iron-gray silk shirt with a standing collar that wrapped his throat with layers of dark material and gave a proud jut to his chin, heavy boots that gleamed, and an ankle-length coat of some soft black material inset with little triangular mirrors. In one pale, long-fingered hand he carried an ebony walking stick that came up to his breastbone and was topped by a silver claw that held a globe of rock crystal.

Casimir laughed and gave an elaborate bow as she entered. The walking stick added to the odd courtly effect. Sula looked at his outfit and hesitated.

"Very original," she decided.

"Chesko," Casimir said. "This time next year, she's going to be dressing everybody." He turned to his two companions. "These are Julien and Veronika. They'll be joining us tonight, if you don't mind." Julien was a younger man with a pointed face, and Veronika was a tinkly blonde who wore brocade and an anklet with stones that glittered.

Interesting, Sula thought, for Casimir to include another couple. Perhaps it was to put her at ease, to assure her that she wouldn't be at close quarters with some predator all night.

"Pleased to meet you," she said. "I'm Gredel."

Casimir gave two snaps of his fingers and a tiled panel slid open in the wall, revealing a well-equipped bar, bottles full of amber, green, and crimson liquids in curiously shaped bottles. "Shall we start with drinks before supper?" he asked.

"I don't drink," Sula said, "but the rest of you go ahead."

Casimir was brought up short on the way to the bar. "Is there anything else you'd like? Hashish or—"

"Sparkling water will be fine," Sula said.

Casimir hesitated again. "Right," he said finally, and handed her a cut-crystal glass that he'd filled from a silver spigot.

He mixed drinks for himself and the others, and everyone sat on the broad, oversoft chairs. Sula tried not to oversplay.

The discussion was about music, songwriters and musicians that Sula didn't know. Casimir told the room to play various audio selections. He liked his music jagged, with angry overtones.

"What do you like?" Julien asked Sula.

"Derivoo," she said.

Veronika gave a little giggle. Julien made a face. "Too intellectual for me," he said.

"It's not intellectual at all," Sula protested. "It's pure emotion."

"It's all about death," Veronika said.

"Why shouldn't it be?" Sula said. "Death is the universal constant. All people suffer and die. Derivoo doesn't try to hide that."

There was a moment of silence in which Sula realized that the inevitability of misery and death was perhaps not the most appropriate topic to bring up on first acquaintance with this group; and then she looked at Casimir and saw a glimmer of wicked amusement in his dark eyes. He seized his walking stick and rose.

"Let's go. Take your drinks if you haven't finished them."

Casimir's huge Victory limousine was shaped like a pumpkin seed and painted and upholstered in no less than eleven shades of apricot. The two Torminel guards sat in front, their huge, night-adapted eyes perfectly at home on the darkened streets. The restaurant was paneled in old, dark wood, the linen was crisp and close-woven, and the fixtures were brass that gleamed finely in the subdued light. Through an elaborate, carved wooden screen, Sula could see another dining room with a few Lai-own sitting in the special chairs that cradled their long breastbones.

Casimir suggested items from the menu, and the elderly waitron, whose stolid, disapproving old face suggested he had seen many like Casimir come and go over the long years, suggested others. Sula followed one of Casimir's suggestions, and found her ostrich steak tender and full of savor, and the krek-tubers, mashed with bits of truffle, slightly oily but full of complex flavors that lingered long on her palate.

Casimir and Julien ordered elaborate drinks, a variety of starters, and a broad selection of desserts, and competed with each other for throwing money away. Half of what they ordered was never eaten or drunk. Julien was exuberant and brash, and Casimir displayed sparks of sardonic wit. Veronika popped her wide eyes open like a perpetually astonished child and giggled a great deal.

From the restaurant they motored to a club, a place atop a tall building in Grandview, the neighborhood where Sula had once lived until she had to blow up her apartment with a group of Naxid police inside. The broad granite dome of the Great Refuge, the highest point of the High City, brooded down on them through the tall glass walls above the bar. Casimir and Julien flung more money away on drinks and tips to waitrons, bartenders, and musicians. If the Naxid occupation was hurting their business, it wasn't showing.

Sula knew she was supposed to be impressed by this. But even years ago, when she was Lamey's girl, she hadn't been impressed by the money

that he and his crowd threw away. She knew too well where the money came from.

She was more impressed by Casimir once he took her onto the dance floor. His long-fingered hands embraced her gently, but behind the gentleness she sensed the solidity of muscle and bone and mass, the calculation of his mind. His attention in the dance was entirely on her, his somber dark eyes intense as they gazed into her face while his body reacted to her weight and motion.

This one thinks! she thought in surprise.

That might make things easy or make them hard. At any rate it made the calculation more difficult.

"Where are you from?" he asked her after they'd sat down. "How come I haven't seen you before?" Julien and Veronika were still on the dance floor, Veronika swirling with expert grace around Julien's clumsy enthusiasm.

"I lived on the ring," Sula said. "Before they blew it up."

"What did you do there?"

She looked at him and felt a smile tug at the corners of her mouth. "I was a math teacher," she said, a story that might account for some of her odd store of knowledge.

His eyes widened. "Give me a math problem and try me," Sula urged, but he didn't reply. She began to develop the feeling her phony occupation might have shocked him.

"When I was in school," he said, "I didn't have math teachers like you."

"You didn't think teachers go to clubs?" Sula said.

A slow thought crossed his face. He leaned closer, and his eyes narrowed. "What I don't understand," he said, "is why, when you're from the ring, you talk like you've spent your life in Riverside."

Sula's nerves sang a warning. She laughed. "Did I say I've spent my whole life on the ring?" she asked. "I don't think so."

"I could check your documents," his eyes hardening, "but of course you sell false documents, so that wouldn't help."

The tension between them was like a coiled serpent ready to strike. She raised an eyebrow. "You still think I'm a provocateur?" she asked. "I haven't asked you to do a single illegal thing all night."

One index finger tapped a slow rhythm on the matte surface of the table before them. "I think you're dangerous," he said.

Sula looked at him and held his gaze. "You're right," she said.

Casimir gave a huff of breath and drew back. Cushions of aesa leather received him. "Why don't you drink?" he asked.

"I grew up around drunks," she said. "I don't want to be like that, not ever."

Which was true, and perhaps Casimir sensed it, because he nodded. "And you lived in Riverside."

"I lived in Zanshaa City till my parents were executed."

His glance was sharp. "For what?"

She shrugged. "For lots of things, I guess. I was little, and I didn't ask."

He cast an uneasy look at the dancers. "My father was executed, too. Strangled."

Sula nodded. "I thought you knew what I meant when I talked about derivoo."

"I knew." Eyes still scanning the dance floor. "But I still think derivoo's depressing."

She found a grin spreading across her face. "We should dance now."

"Yes." His grin answered hers. "We should."

They danced till they were both breathless, and then Casimir moved the party to another club, in the Hotel of Many Blessings, where there was more dancing, more drinking, more money spread around. After which Casimir said they should take a breather, and he took them into an elevator lined with what looked like mother-of-pearl, and bade it rise to the penthouse.

The door opened to Casimir's thumbprint. The room was swathed in shiny draperies, and the furniture was low and comfortable. A table was laid with a cold supper, meats and cheeses and flat wroncho bread, pickles, chutneys, elaborate tarts and cakes, and bottles lying in a tray of shaved ice. It had obviously been intended all along that the evening end here.

Sula put together an open-faced sandwich—nice Vigo plates, she noticed, a clean modern design—then began to rehearse her exit. Surely it was not coincidental that a pair of bedrooms were very handy.

I've got to work in the morning. It certainly sounded more plausible than *I've got to go organize a counter-rebellion.*

Casimir put his walking stick in a rack that had probably been made for it specially and reached for a pair of small packages, each with glossy wrapping and a brilliant scarlet ribbon. He presented one each to Sula and Veronika.

"With thanks for a wonderful evening."

The gift proved to be perfume, a crystal bottle containing Sengra, made with the musk of the rare and reclusive ataubia tree-crawlers of Paycahp. The small vial in her hand might have set Casimir back twenty zeniths or more—probably more, since Sengra was exactly the sort of thing that wouldn't be coming down from orbit for years, not with the ring gone.

Veronika opened her package and popped her eyes wide—that gesture was going to look silly on her when she was fifty—and gave a squeal of delight. Sula opted for a more moderate response and kissed Casimir's cheek.

There was the sting of stubble against her lips. He looked at her with calculation. There was a very male scent to him.

Sula was about to bring up the work she had to do in the morning when there was a chime from Casimir's sleeve display. He gave a scowl of annoyance and answered.

"Casimir," came a strange voice. "We've got a situation."

"Wait," Casimir said. He left the room and closed the door behind him. Sula munched a pickle while the others waited in silence.

Casimir returned with the scowl still firm on his face. He was without a trace of apology as he looked at Sula and Veronika and said, "Sorry, but the evening's over. Something's come up."

Veronika pouted and reached for her jacket. Casimir reached for Sula's

arm to draw her to the door. She looked at him. "What's just happened?"

Casimir gave her an impatient, insolent look—it was none of her business, after all—then thought better of it and shrugged. "Not what's happened, but what's going to happen in a few hours. The Naxids are declaring food rationing."

"They're *what*?" Sula's first reaction was outrage. Casimir opened the door for her, and she hesitated there, thinking. Casimir quivered with impatience. "Congratulations," she said finally. "The Naxids have just made you very rich."

"I'll call you," he said.

"I'll be rich, too," Sula said. "Ration cards will cost you a hundred apiece."

"A *hundred*?" For a moment it was Casimir's turn to be outraged.

"Think about it," Sula said. "Think how much they'll be worth to you."

They held each other's eyes for a moment, and then both broke into laughter. "We'll talk price later," Casimir said, and he hustled her into the vestibule along with Veronika, who showed Sula a five-zenith coin.

"Julien gave it to me for the cab," she said triumphantly. "And we get to keep the change!"

"You'd better hope the cab *has* change for a fiver," Sula said, and Veronika thought for a moment.

"We'll get change in the lobby."

A Daimong night clerk gave them change, and Veronika's nose wrinkled at the smell. On the way to her apartment Sula learned that Veronika was a former model and now an occasional club hostess.

"I'm an unemployed math teacher," Sula said.

Veronika's eyes went wide. "Wow," she said.

After letting Veronika off, Sula had the Torminel driver take her within two streets of the Riverside apartment, after which she walked the distance to the building by the light of the stars. Overhead the broken arcs of the ring were a line of black against the faintly glowing sky. Outside the apartment she gazed up for a long moment until she discerned the pale gleam of the white ceramic pot in the front window. It was in the position that meant "someone is in the apartment and it is safe."

The lock on the building's front door, the one that read her fingerprint, worked only erratically, but this time she caught it by surprise and the door opened. She went up the stair, then used her key on the apartment lock.

Macnamara was asleep on the couch, with a pair of pistols on the table in front of him, along with a grenade.

"Hi, dad," Sula said as he blinked awake. "Junior brought me home safe, just like he said he would."

Macnamara looked embarrassed. Sula gave him a grin.

"What were you planning on doing with a *grenade*?" she asked.

Macnamara didn't reply. Sula took off her jacket and called up the computer that resided in the desk. "I've got work to do," Sula said. "You'd better get some sleep, because I've got a job for you first thing in the morning."

"What's that?" He rose from the couch, scratching his sleep-tousled hair.

"The market opens at 07:27, right?"

"Yes."

Sula sat herself at the desk. "I need you to buy as much food as you can carry. Canned, dried, bottled, freeze-dried. Get the biggest sack of flour they have, and another sack of beans. Condensed milk would be good. Get Spence to help you carry it all."

"What's going on?" Macnamara was bewildered.

"Food rationing."

"What?" Sula could hear the outrage in Macnamara's voice as she called up a text program.

"Two reasons for it I can think of," Sula said. "First, issuing everyone with a ration card will be a way of re-processing every ID on the planet . . . help them weed out troublemakers and saboteurs. Second . . ." She held up one hand and made the universal gesture of tossing a coin in her palm. "Artificial scarcities are going to make some Naxids very, very rich."

"Damn them," Macnamara breathed.

"We'll do very well," Sula pointed out. "We'll quadruple our prices on everything on the ration—you don't suppose they'd be good enough to ration *tobacco*, would you?—and we'll make a fortune."

"Damn them," Macnamara said again.

Sula gave him a pointed look. "Good night," she said. "Dad."

He flushed and shambled to bed. Sula turned to her work.

"What if they ration *alcohol*?" she said aloud as the thought struck her. There would be stills in half the bathrooms in Zanshaa, processing potatoes, taswa peels, apple cores, whatever they could find.

She accessed the Records Office computer—her back door was the legacy of an earlier job processing refugees from the ring, before she'd volunteered to get herself killed leading partisan forces—and checked the protocols for acquiring ration cards. Given her level of access, they should be easy enough to subvert.

And then she had another thought. Thus far her group had been selling her own property out of the back of a truck, a business that was irregular but legal. But once the ration came into effect, selling cocoa and coffee off the ration would be against the law. The team wouldn't just be participating in informal economic activity, they'd be committing a *crime*.

People who committed crimes needed protection. Casimir was going to be more necessary than ever.

"Damn it," she said.

Macnamara failed to procure a large stash of food. Police were already in force at the market, and foodsellers had been told not to sell large quantities. Macnamara wisely decided to avoid attracting attention and bought only quantities that might be considered reasonable for a family of three.

The announcement of rationing had been made while Sula slept and the food marts were packed. Tobacco had not been included, but Sula couldn't hope for everything. Citizens were given twenty days to report to their local police station in order to apply for a ration card. The reason given by the government for the imposition of rationing was the destruction of the ring and the decline in food imports.

The news also announced that certain well-established Naxid clans, out of pure civic spirit, had agreed to spare the government expense, and

would instead use their own means to manage the planet's food supplies. The Jagirin clan, whose head had been temporary interior minister during the changeover from the old government to the new, the Ummir clan, whose head happened to be the Minister of Police, the Ushgays, the Kulukrafs . . . people who, even if some of them hadn't been with the rebellion from the beginning, clearly found it in their interest to support it now.

The Naxids, Sula thought, had just created a whole new class of target.

Naxids were placed in every police station to monitor the process of acquiring ration cards, and the Naxids wore the black uniform of the Legion of Diligence, the organization that investigated crimes against the Praxis. All members of the Legion had been evacuated from Zanshaa before the arrival of the Naxid fleet, so apparently the new government had reformed the Legion, probably with personnel from the Naxid police.

Another class of target, Sula thought.

A shimmering layer of afternoon heat stretched across the pavement like a layer of molasses, thick enough to distort the colorful canopies and displays of the Textile Market that set up in Sula's street every five days. Early in the morning, vendors motored up with their trailers or their three-wheelers with the sheds built onto the back, and at dawn hour the sheds opened, canopies went up, and the merchandise went on sale. After sunset, as the heat began to dissipate and the purple shadows crept between the stalls, the vendors would break down their displays and motor away, to set up the next day in another part of the city.

As Sula passed, vendors called her attention to cheap women's clothing, baby clothes, shoes, stockings, scarves, and inexpensive toys for children. There were bolts of fabric, foils of music and entertainment, sun lotion and sun hats, and items—unseasonable in the heat—alleged to be knit from the fleece of Yormak cattle, and sold at a surprisingly low price.

Despite the heat, the market was thronged. Tired and hot, Sula elbowed her way impatiently through the crowd to her doorstep. She entered the building, then heard the chime of a hand comm through her apartment door and made haste to enter. She snatched up the comm from the table and answered, panting.

Casimir surveyed her from the display. She could watch his eyes travel insolently over her image as far as the frame would permit.

"Too bad," he said. "I was hoping to catch you in the bath again."

"Better luck next time." Sula switched on the room coolers and somewhere in the building a tired compressor began to wheeze, and faint currents of air began to stir. She dropped into a chair, and holding the comm in one hand she began to loosen her boots with the other.

"I want to see you tonight," Casimir said. "I'll pick you up at 21:01, all right?"

"Why don't I meet you at the club?"

"Nothing happens at the club that early." He frowned. "Don't you want me to know where you live?"

"I don't have a place of my own," Sula lied cheerfully. "I sort of bounce between friends."

"Well." Grudgingly. "I'll see you at the club, then."

She had time to bathe, get a bite to eat, and work for a while on the accounts of her delivery company. Then she checked the Records Office computer for Casimir's friend Julien, and discovered that he was the son of Sergius Bakshi.

Sergius was someone she'd heard of as the head of the Riverside Clique. She hadn't realized that he'd cheated the executioner long enough to have a grown son.

Sula left the apartment, negotiated the crowds at the Textile Market, then ducked down a sunblasted side street, trying to keep on the shady side. The heat still took her breath away. She made another turn, then entered the delightfully cool air of a block-shaped storage building built in the shadow of the even larger Riverside Crematorium. She showed her false ID to the Cree at the desk, then took the elevator upstairs and opened one of Team 491's storage caches. There she opened one of the cases, withdrew a small item, and pocketed it.

Casimir waited by his car in front of the Cat Street club with an impatient scowl on his face and his walking stick in his hand. He wore a soft white shirt covered with minutely stitched braid. As she appeared, he stabbed the door button, and the glossy apricot-colored door rolled up into the car roof. "I *hate* being kept waiting," he growled in his deep voice, and took her arm roughly to stuff her into the passenger compartment.

This too, Sula remembered, was what it was like to be a clique member's girlfriend.

Sula settled herself on apricot-colored plush across from Julien and Veronika, the latter in fluttery garb and a cloud of Sengra. Casimir thudded into the seat next to her and rolled down the door; Sula called up the chronometer on her sleeve display.

"I'm three minutes early," she said primly, in what she trusted was a math teacher's voice. "I'm sorry if I spoiled your evening."

Casimir gave an unsociable grunt. Veronika popped her blue eyes wide and said, "The boys are taking us shopping!"

Sula remembered that part about being a cliqueman's girlfriend, too.

"Where?" she said.

"It's a surprise," Julien said, and slid open the door on the vehicle's bar. "Anyone want something to drink?"

The Torminel behind the controls slipped the car smoothly from the curb on its six tires. Sula had a Citrine Fling while the rest drank Ky-owan. The vehicle passed through Grandview to the Petty Mount, a district in the shadow of the High City, beneath the Couch of Eternity where the ashes of the Shaa masters waited in their niches for the end of time. The area was lively, filled with boutiques, bars, cafes, and eccentric shops that sold folk crafts or antiques or old jewelry. Sula saw Cree and Lai-own on the streets as well as Terrans.

The car pulled to a smooth stop before a shop called Raiment by Chesko, and the apricot-colored doors rolled open. They stepped from the vehicle and were greeted at the door by a female Daimong whose gray body was wrapped in a kind of satin sheath that looked strangely attractive on her angular body with its matchstick arms. In a chiming voice she greeted Casimir by name.

"Gredel, this is Miss Chesko," Casimir told Sula in a voice that suggested both her importance and his own.

"Pleased to meet you," Sula said.

The shop was a three-level fantasy filled with sumptuous fabrics in brilliant colors, all set against neutral-colored walls of a translucent resinous substance that let in the fading light of the sun. Gossamer Cree music floated tastefully in the air.

A Daimong who designed clothes for Terrans was something new in Sula's experience. The shop must have had excellent air circulation, or Chesko wore something that suppressed the odor of her rotting flesh, because Sula didn't scent her even once.

Casimir's mood changed the instant he entered the shop. He walked from one rack to the next and heaved out clothing for Sula or Veronika to try on. He held garments critically to the light and ran his hands over the glossy, rich fabrics. Veronika's were soft and bright and shimmered; Sula's were satiny and tended to the darker shades, with light accents in the form of a scarf, lapel, or collar.

He's dressing me as a woman of mystery, Sula thought.

His antennae were really rather acute.

His tastes were fairly good as well, Sula thought as she looked at herself in the full-length video display. She found that she enjoyed herself playing model, displaying one rich garment after another. Casimir offered informed comment as Sula changed outfits, twitched the clothing to a better drape, and sorted the clothing into piles of yeses, maybes, rejects. Chesko made respectful suggestions in her bell-like tones. Shop assistants ran back and forth with mountains of clothing in their arms.

It hadn't been like this with Lamey, Sula remembered. When he walked into a shop with Gredel, the assistants knew to bring out their flashiest, most expensive clothing, and he'd buy them with a wave of his hand and a pocket of cash.

Casimir wasn't doing this to impress anyone, or at least not in the way Lamey had. He was demonstrating his taste, not his power and money.

"You should have Chesko's job," she told him.

"Maybe. I seem to have got the wrong training, though."

"Your mama didn't give you enough dolls to play with when you were growing up," Julien said. He sat in a chair in a corner, out of everyone's way. He had a tolerant smile on his pointed face and a glass of mig brandy, brought by the staff, in one hand.

"I'm hungry," Julien said after an hour and a half.

Casimir looked a little put out, but he shrugged and then looked again through the piles of clothing, making a final sorting. Julien rose from his chair, put down his glass, and addressed one of the assistants.

"That pile," he said. "Total it up."

Veronika gave a whoop of joy and ran to embrace him. "Better add this," Casimir said, adding a vest to the yes pile. He picked up an embroidered jacket from another heap and held it out to Sula. "What do you think of this?" he said. "Should I add it to your pile?"

Sula considered the jacket. "I think you should pick out the single very nicest thing out of the stack and give it to me."

His dark eyes flashed, and his gravel voice was suddenly full of anger. "You don't want my presents?" he asked.

Sula was aware that Veronika was staring at her as if she were insane.

"I'll take a present," Sula said. "You don't know me well enough to buy me a whole wardrobe."

For a moment she sensed thwarted rage boiling off of him, and then after a moment he thought about it and decided to be amused. His mouth twisted in a tight-lipped smile. "Very well," he said. He considered the pile for a moment, then reached in and pulled out a suit, velvet black, with satin braid and silver beadwork on the lapels and down the sides of the loose trousers.

"Will this do?" he said.

"It's very nice. Thank you." Sula noted that it wasn't the most expensive item in the pile, and that fact pleased her. If he wasn't buying her expensive trash, it probably meant he didn't think she was trash, either.

"Will you wear it tonight?" He hesitated, then looked at Chesko. "It didn't need fitting, did it?"

"No, sir." Her pale, expressionless Daimong face, set in a permanent caricature of wide-eyed alarm, gave no sign of disappointment in losing sales worth hundreds of zeniths.

"Happy to," Sula said. She took the suit to the changing room, changed, and looked at herself in the old-fashioned silver-backed mirrors. The suit probably *was* the nicest thing in the pile.

Her old clothes were wrapped in a package, and she stepped out to a look of appreciation from Julien, and the more critical gaze of Casimir. He gestured with a finger as if stirring a pot.

"Turn around," he said.

She made a pirouette, and he nodded, more to himself than to anyone else. "That works," he said. The deep voice sounded pleased.

"Can we eat now?" Julien asked.

Outside, the white marble of the Couch of Eternity glowed in twilight. The streets exhaled summer heat into the sky like an overtaxed athlete panting at the end of his run.

They ate in a café, a place of bright red-and-white tiles and shiny chrome. The café was crowded and noisy, as if people wanted to pack in as much food and good times as possible before rationing began. Casimir and Julien were in a lighthearted mood, chattering and laughing, but every so often Sula caught Casimir looking at her with a thoughtful expression, as if he was approving his choice of outfit.

He had made her into something he admired.

Afterward they went to a bar, equally crowded, with a live band and dancing. The other night Casimir had danced with a kind of gravity, but now he was exuberant, laughing as he led her into athletic kicks, spins, and twirls. Before, he had been pleasing himself with a show of his power and control, but now it was as if he wanted all Zanshaa to share his joy.

He was taking me for granted the other night, Sula thought. Now he's not.

It was well past midnight when they left the bar. Outside, in the starlit

darkness, a pair of strange colossi moved in the night. Leather creaked. A strange barnyard smell floated to Sula's nostrils.

Casimir gave a laugh. "Right," he said. "Get in."

He launched himself into some kind of box that, dimly perceived, seemed to float above the street. There was a creak, a shuffle, more barnyard smell. His long pale hand appeared out of the night.

"Come on," he said.

Sula took the hand and let him draw her forward. A step, a box, a seat. She seated herself next to him before she understood where she was, and amazement flooded her.

"Is this a pai-car carriage?" she asked.

"That's right!" Casimir let a laugh float off into the night. "We hired a pair for tonight." He thumped the leather-padded rim of the cockpit and called to the driver. "Let's go!"

There was a hiss from the driver, a flap of reins, and the carriage lurched into movement. The vehicle was pulled by a pai-car, a tall flightless bird, a carnivorous, unintelligent cousin to the Lai-own driver that perched on the front of the carriage. There were two big silver alloy wheels, ornamented with cutouts, and a boat-shaped car made out of leather, boiled, treated, sculpted, and ornamented with bright metal badges. Mounted on either side were some cell-powered lamps, not very powerful, which the driver now switched on.

The car swayed down off the Petty Mount and into the flat cityscape below. Sula relaxed against Casimir's shoulder. Darkened buildings loomed up on either side like valley walls. The slap of the pai-car's feet and its huffing breath echoed off the structures on either side. There seemed to be no other traffic at all, nothing but the limousine, with its Torminel guards, that followed them at a distance, the driver's huge nocturnal eyes able to navigate perfectly well by starlight.

"Is this legal?" Sula wondered.

Casimir's bright white teeth flashed in the starlight. "Of course not. These carriages aren't permitted outside the parks."

"You don't expect police?"

Casimir's grin broadened. "The police are bogged down processing millions of ration card applications. The streets are ours for the next month."

Veronika's laughter tinkled through the night. Sula heard the slap of another pair of feet, and saw the savage saw-toothed face of another pai-car loom up on the left, followed soon by the driver and Julien and Veronika. Julien leaned out of the carriage, hands waving drunkenly in the air. "A hundred says I beat you to Medicine Street!"

Sula felt Casimir's body grow taut as Julien's face vanished into the gloom ahead. He called to the driver: "Faster!" The driver gave a hiss and a flap of the reins. The carriage creaked and swayed as the pace increased.

Veronika's laughter taunted them from ahead. Casimir growled and leaned forward. "Faster!" he called. Sula's nerves tingled to the awareness of danger.

A few lights shone high in office buildings where the staff were cleaning. A rare functioning street lamp revealed two Torminel, in the brown

uniforms of the civil service, in an apparent argument. The two fell silent and stared with their large eyes as the carriages raced past, their silver wheels a blur.

The side-lamps of Julien's carriage ahead loomed closer. "Faster!" Casimir called, and he turned to Sula, a laugh rumbling from deep in his chest. Sula felt an answering grin tear at her lips. *This is mad*, she thought. *Absolutely mad*.

She heard Julien's voice calling for greater speed. The wheels threw up sparks as they skidded through a turn. Sula was thrown against Casimir. He put an arm around her protectively.

"Faster!"

Veronika's laughter tinkled from ahead, closer this time. Casimir ducked left and right, peering around the driver for a better view of the carriage they were pursuing. They passed through an intersection and both carriages glared white in the startled headlamps of a huge street-cleaning machine. Sula blinked the dazzle from her eyes. The night air was cool on her cheeks. She could feel her heart beating high in her throat.

Sula heard Julien curse as they drew even. Then they were in another turn, metal wheels sliding, and Julien's carriage loomed close as it skidded toward them. Their driver was forced into a wider turn to avoid collision, and Julien pulled ahead.

"Damn!" Casimir jumped from his seat and leaped to join the driver on the box. One pale hand dug in a pocket. "Twenty zeniths if you beat him!" he called, and slapped a coin down on the box. Twenty zeniths would buy the coach, the pai-car, and the driver twice over.

The driver responded with a frantic hiss. The pai-car seemed to have caught the fey mood of the passengers and gave a determined cry as it accelerated.

The road narrowed as it crossed a canal, and Casimir's coach was on the heels of Julien's as they crossed the bridge. Sula caught a whiff of sour canal water, heard the startled exclamation of someone on the quay, and then the coach hit a bump and Sula was tossed in the car like a pea in a bottle. Then they were in another turn, and Sula was pressed to one side, the leather bending slightly under her weight.

She gave a laugh at the realization that her whole life's adventure could end here, that she could die in a ridiculous carriage accident or find herself under arrest, that her work—the war against the Naxids, her team, her many identities—all could be destroyed in a reckless, demented instant. . . .

Serve me right, she thought.

The labored breathing of the pai-car echoed between the buildings. "Twenty more!" Casimir slapped another coin on the box.

The carriage swayed alongside that of Julien. He was standing in the car, urging his driver on, but his pai-car looked dead in its harness. Then there was a sudden glare of headlights, the clatter of a vehicle collision alarm, and Julien's driver gave an urgent tug on the reins, cutting his bird's speed and swerving behind Casimir's carriage to avoid collision with a taxi taking home a singing chorus of Cree.

Sula heard Julien's yelp of protest. Casimir laughed in triumph as the singers disappeared in their wake.

They had passed through the silent business district and into a more lively area of Grandview. Sula saw people on the street, cabs parked by the curb waiting for customers. Ahead she saw an intersection, a traffic signal flashing a command to stop.

"Keep going!" Casimir cried, and slapped down another coin. The driver gave Casimir a wild, gold-eyed stare, but obeyed.

Sula heard a rumble ahead, saw a white light. The traffic signal blazed in the darkness. Her heart leaped into her throat.

The carriage dashed into the intersection. Casimir's laughter rang in her ears. There was a brilliant white light, a blaring collision alarm, the screech of tires. Sula threw her arms protectively over her head as the pai-car gave a wail of terror.

The edge of the carriage bit Sula's ribs as the vehicle was slammed sideways. A side-lamp exploded into bits of flying crystal. One large silver wheel went bounding down the road ahead of the truck that had torn it away, and the carriage fell heavily onto the torn axle. Sparks arced in the night as the panicked bird tried to drag the tilted carriage from the scene.

The axle grated near Sula's ear. She blinked into the night just in time to see Casimir lose his balance on the box and fall toward her, arms thrashing in air. She made a desperate lunge for the high side of the coach and managed to avoid being crushed as he fell heavily onto the seat.

Clinging to the high side of the coach, she turned to him. Casimir was helpless with laughter, a deep bass sound that echoed the grinding of the axle on pavement. Sula allowed herself to slide down the seat onto him, wrapped him in her arms, and stopped his laughter with a kiss.

The panting pai-car came to a halt. Sula heard its snarls of frustration as it turned in the traces and tried to savage the driver with its razor teeth, then heard the driver expertly divert its striking head with slaps. She could hear the truck reversing, the other pai-car padding to a halt, the sound of running footsteps as people ran to the scene.

She could hear Casimir's heart pounding in his chest.

"I conceive that no one is injured," said the burbling voice of a Cree.

This time it was Sula who was helpless with laughter. She and Casimir crawled from the wreckage of the carriage just as the apricot-colored limousine rolled silently to a stop, the Torminel guards appearing in time to prevent a very angry Daimong truck driver from bludgeoning someone. Julien and Casimir passed around enough money to leave everyone happy, the carriage drivers in particular, and then the party piled into the limousine for the ride to the Hotel of Many Blessings.

Sula sat in Casimir's lap and kissed him for the entire ride.

Sula insisted on taking a shower before joining him in bed. Then she insisted that he take a shower, too.

"We could have showered *together*," Casimir grumbled.

"You could use a shave, too," Sula pointed out.

He returned to bed, showered and shaved and scented with taswa-blossom soap . . .

"Hey!" he said in surprise. "You're really a blonde!"

She gave a slow laugh. "That's the least of my mysteries."

An hour or so later, Sula decided to play a card or two, and told the room light to go on. Casimir gave a start and shielded his eyes. Sula crawled out of bed and looked for the package that held the clothing she'd worn at the beginning of the evening.

"Gredel, what are you *doing*?" Casimir complained.

"I have something to show you." Sula dug in an inner pocket and removed the item she'd taken from the storage locker earlier in the evening. She opened the slim plastic case and showed Casimir her Fleet ID.

"I'm Caroline, Lady Sula," she said. "I'm here fighting the Naxids."

There was a moment of silence. Casimir squeezed his eyes shut for a long moment, as if in disbelief, and then opened them.

"Shit," he said.

Sula smiled at him.

"I guess you know me well enough to buy me a new wardrobe, if you still want to."

The meeting with Julien's father, Sergius Bakshi, occurred three days after the madcap carriage race, on an afternoon dark with racing clouds. Sula dressed for the meeting with care. In order that she look more like the person in the Fleet ID, she left off her contact lenses and bought a shoulder-length wig in her natural shade of blonde. She wore a military-style jacket in a tone of green that wasn't quite the viridian of a Fleet uniform, but which she hoped suggested it. She brought Macnamara as an aide, or perhaps a bodyguard, and bought him a similar jacket. She reminded herself to walk with the straight-backed, braced posture of the Fleet officer and not the less formal slouch she'd adopted as Gredel.

She wore a pistol stuck down her waistband in back. Macnamara had a sidearm in a shoulder holster.

These were less for defense than to shoot themselves, or each other, in the event things went wrong.

There was a lot of shooting going on these days. The Naxids had shot sixty-odd people in retaliation for the firebombing of a Motor Patrol vehicle in the Old Third, and then they'd gone into the Old Third and shot about a dozen people at random.

The meeting took place in a private club called Silk Winds on the second floor of an office building in a Lai-own neighborhood. Casimir met her on the pavement out front, dressed in his long coat and carrying his walking stick. His eyes went wide as he saw her, and then he grinned and gave one of his elaborate bows. From his bent position he looked up at her.

"You still don't look much like a math teacher," he said.

"Good thing then," she said, in her drawling Peer voice. His eyebrows lifted in surprise, and he straightened.

"Now *that's* not the voice I heard in bed the other night."

From over her shoulder Sula heard Macnamara's intake of breath. Great, Sula thought, now she'd have a scandalized and sulking team member.

"Don't be vulgar," she admonished, still in her Peer voice.

Casimir bowed again. "Apologies, my lady."

He led her into the building. The lobby was cavernous, brilliant with polished copper, and featured a twice-life-size bronze statue of a Lai-own holding, for some allegorical reason beyond Sula's comprehension, a large tetrahedron. Uniformed Lai-own security guards in blue jackets and tall pointed shakos gave them searching looks, but did not approach. A moving stair took Sula to the second floor and to the polished copper door of the club, on which had been placed a card informing them that the club had been closed for a private function.

Casimir swung the door open and led Sula and Macnamara into the shadow-filled club. Faint sunlight from the darkened sky gleamed fitfully off copper fittings and polished wood. Lai-own security—this time without the silly hats—appeared from the gloom and checked everyone very thoroughly for listening devices. They found the sidearms but didn't touch them. Apparently they discounted the possibility that Sula and her party might be assassins.

Casimir, adjusting his long coat after the search, led them to a back room. He knocked on a nondescript door.

Sula smoothed the lapel of her jacket and straightened her shoulders and reminded herself to act like a senior fleet commander inspecting a motley group of dock workers. She couldn't give orders to these people: she had to use a different kind of authority. Being a Peer and a Fleet officer were the only cards she had left to play. She had to be the embodiment of the Fleet and the legitimate government and the whole body of Peers, and she would have to carry them all along through sheer weight of her own expectation.

Julien opened the door, and his eyes went wide when he saw Sula. Suddenly nervous, he backed hastily from the door.

Sula walked into the room, her spine straight, hands clasped behind her. *I own* this room, she told herself, but then she saw the eyes of her audience and her heart gave a lurch.

Two Terrans, a Lai-own, and a Daimong sat in the shadowy, dark-paneled room, facing her from behind a table that looked like a slab of pavement torn from the street. Nature had made the Daimong expressionless but the others were so blank-faced that they might have all been carved from the same block of granite.

She heard Macnamara stamp to a halt behind her right shoulder, a welcome support. Casimir stepped around them and stood to one side of the room.

"Gentlemen," he said, and again made his elaborate bow. "May I present Lieutenant the Lady Sula."

"I'm Sergius Bakshi," said one of the Terrans. He looked nothing like his son Julien: he had a round face and a razor-cut mustache and the round, unfeeling eyes of a great predator fish. He turned to the Lai-own. "This is Am Tan-dau, who has very kindly arranged for us to meet here."

Tan-dau did not look kindly. He slumped in the padded chair that cradled his keel-like breastbone, his bright, fashionable clothes wrinkled on him as they might on a sack of feathers. His skin was dull, and nictating

membranes were half-deployed across his eyes. He looked a hundred years old, but Sula could tell from the dark feathery hair on each side of his head that he was still young.

Bakshi continued. "These are friends who may be interested in any proposition you may have for us." He nodded at the Terran. "This is Mister Patel." A young man with glossy hair that curled over the back of his collar, Patel didn't even blink in response when Sula offered him a small nod.

The Daimong's name was Sagas.

Sula knew, through Casimir, that the four were a kind of informal commission that regulated illegal activities on this end of Zanshaa City. Bakshi's word carried the most weight, if only because he'd managed to reach middle age without being killed.

"Gentlemen," Sula drawled in her Peer voice. "May I present my aide, Mister Macnamara."

Four pairs of eyes flicked to Macnamara, then back to Sula. Her mouth was suddenly dry, and she resisted the impulse to clear her throat.

Bakshi folded large, doughy hands on the table in front of him and spoke. "What may we do for you, Lady Sula?"

Sula's answer was swift. "Help me kill Naxids."

Even that request, which Sula hoped might startle them a little, failed to provoke a reaction.

Bakshi deliberately folded his hands on the table before him. His eyes never left hers. "Assuming for the sake of argument that this is remotely possible," he said, "why should we agree to attack a group so formidable that even the Fleet has failed to defeat them?"

Sula looked down at him. If he wanted a staring contest, she thought, then she'd give him one.

"The Fleet isn't done with the Naxids," she said. "Not by a long shot. I don't know whether you have the means to verify this or not, but I know that even now the Fleet is raiding deep into Naxid territory. The Fleet is ripping the guts out of the rebellion while the Naxid force is stuck here guarding the capital."

Bakshi gave a subtle movement of his shoulders that might have been a strangled shrug. "Possibly," he said. "But that doesn't alter the fact that the Naxids are *here*."

"How do we know?" Tan-dau's voice was a mumble. "How do we know that she is not sent by the Naxids to provoke us?"

It was difficult to be certain to whom Tan-dau addressed the question, but Sula decided to intercept it. "I killed a couple of thousand Naxids at Magaria," Sula said. "You may remember that I received a decoration for it. I don't think they'd let me switch sides even if I wanted to."

"Lady Sula is supposed to be dead," Tan-dau said, to no one in particular.

"Well." Sula permitted herself a slight smile. "You know how accurate the Naxids have been about everything else."

"How do we know she is the real . . ." Tan-dau's sentence drifted away before he could finish it. Sula waited until it was clear that no more words were coming, and then answered.

"You can't know," Sula said. She brought her Fleet ID out of her jacket. "You're welcome to examine my identification, but of course the Naxids could have faked it. But I think you know . . ." She gazed at them all in turn. ". . . if the Naxids wanted to target you, they wouldn't need me. They've declared martial law; they'd just send their people after you, and no one would ever see you alive again."

They absorbed this in expressionless silence. "Why then," Bakshi said finally, "should we act so as to bring this upon us?"

Sula'd had three days to prepare what came next. She had to restrain herself from babbling it out all at once, to urge herself to remain calm, and to make her points slowly and with proper emphasis.

"You want to be on the winning side, for one thing," she said. "That brings its own rewards. Second, the secret government is prepared to offer pardons and amnesties for anyone who aids us."

It was like talking to a blank wall. She wanted to stride about, to gesture, to declaim, all in desperate hope of getting at least one of the group to show some response. But she forced herself to be still, to keep her hands clasped behind her, to stand in an attitude of superiority. She had to project command and authority: if she showed weakness she was finished.

"What," said Sagas, speaking for the first time in his beautiful chiming Daimong voice, "makes you think that we need pardons and amnesties?"

"A pardon," Sula said, "means that any investigations, any complaints, any inquiries, any proceedings come to a complete and permanent end. Not only for yourself, but for any of your friends, clients, and associates who may wish to aid the government. You may not need any amnesties yourself, but perhaps some of your friends aren't so lucky."

She scanned her audience again. Once again, no response.

"My last point," she said, "is that you are all prominent, successful individuals. People know your names. You have earned the respect of the population, and people are wary of your power. But you're not loved."

For the first time she'd managed to provoke a response. Surprise widened Bakshi's pupils, and even the expressionless Sagas gave a jerk of his head.

"If you lead the fight against the Naxids, you'll be heroes," Sula said. "Maybe for the first time, people will think of you as agents of virtue. You'll be loved, because everyone will see you on the right side, standing between them and the Naxids."

Patel gave a sudden laugh. "Fight the Naxids for love!" he said. "That's a *good* one! I'm for it!" He slapped the table with a hand, and looked up at Sula with his teeth flashing in a broad grin. "I'm with you, my lady! For love, and for no other reason!"

Sula ventured a glance at Casimir. He gave her an wry, amused look, not quite encouragement but not dispirited either.

Bakshi gave an impatient motion of his hand, and Patel fell silent, his hilarity gone in an instant and leaving a hollow silence behind.

"What exactly," Bakshi began, "would the secret government want us to do . . ." Chill irony entered his voice. ". . . for the people's love."

"There are cells of resisters forming all over the city," Sula said, "but

they have no way to communicate or coordinate with each other." Again, she looked at them all in turn. "You *already* have a paramilitary structure. You *already* have means of communication that the government doesn't control. What we'd like you to do is to coordinate these groups. Pass information up the chain of command, pass orders downward, make certain equipment gets where it's needed . . . that sort of thing."

There was another moment of silence. Then Bakshi extruded one index finger from a big, pale hand and tapped the table. In a man so silent and restrained, the gesture seemed as dramatic as a pistol shot. "I should like to know one thing," Bakshi said. "Lord Governor Pahn-ko has been captured and executed. Who is it, exactly, who runs the secret government?"

Sula clenched her teeth to avoid a wail of despair. This was the one question she'd dreaded.

She had decided that she could lie to anyone else as circumstances demanded, but that she would never lie to the people at the table before her. The consequences of lying to them were simply too dire.

"I am the senior officer remaining," Sula said.

Surprise widened Patel's eyes. His mouth dropped open, but he didn't say anything. Tan-dau gave Bakshi a sidelong glance.

"You are a lieutenant," Bakshi said, "and young, and recently promoted at that."

"That is true," Sula said. She could feel sweat collecting under the blonde wig. "But I am also a Peer of ancient name, and a noted killer of Naxids."

"It seems to me," Tan-dau said, again seeming to address no one in particular, "that she wishes us to organize and fight her war for her. I wonder what it is that *she* will contribute?"

Defiant despair rose in Sula. "My training, my name, and my skill at killing Naxids," she answered.

Bakshi looked at her. "I'm sure your skill and courage are up to the task," he said. "But of course you are a soldier." He looked at the folk on either side of him, and spread his hands. "We, on the other hand, are men of commerce and of peace. We have our businesses and our families to consider. If we join your resistance to the Naxids, we put all we have worked for in jeopardy."

Sula opened her mouth to speak, but Bakshi held up a hand for silence. "You have assured us that the loyalist Fleet will return and that Zanshaa will be freed from Naxid rule. If that is the case, there is no need for an army here on the ground. But if you are wrong, and the Naxids aren't driven out, then any resisters here in the capital are doomed." He gave a slow shake of his head. "We wish you the best, but I don't understand why we should involve ourselves. The risk is too great."

Another heavy silence rose. Sula, a leaden hopelessness beating through her veins, looked at the others. "Do you all agree?" she asked.

Tan-dau and Sagas said nothing. Patel gave a rueful grin. "Sorry the love thing didn't work out, princess," he said. "It could have been fun."

"The Naxids are already nibbling at your businesses," Sula said. "When rationing starts and you go into the food business, you'll be competing directly with the clans the Naxids have set in power. It's then that you'll be challenging them directly, and they'll have to destroy you."

Bakshi gave her another of his dead-eyed looks. "What makes you think we'll involve ourselves in illegal foodstuffs?"

"A market in illegal foodstuffs is inevitable," Sula said. "If you don't put yourselves at the head of it, you'll lose control to the people who do."

There was another long silence. Bakshi spread his hands. "There's nothing we can do, my lady." He turned to Casimir and gave him a deliberate stone-eyed look. "Our associates can do nothing, either."

"Of course not, Sergius," Casimir murmured.

Sula looked down her nose at them each in turn, but none offered anything more. Her hands clenched behind her back, the nails scoring her palms. She wanted to offer more arguments, weaker ones even, but she knew it would be useless and did not.

"I thank you then, for agreeing to hear me," she said, and turned to Tan-dau. "I appreciate your offering this place for the meeting."

"Fortune attend you, my lady," Tan-dau said formally.

Fortune was precisely what had just deserted her. She gave a brisk military nod to the room in general and made a proper military turn.

Macnamara anticipated her and stepped to the rear of the room, holding the door for her. She marched out with her shoulders still squared, her blonde head high.

Bastards, she thought.

There was a thud behind as Macnamara tried to close the door just as Casimir tried to exit. Macnamara glared at Casimir as he shouldered his way out and fell into step alongside Sula.

"That went better than I'd expected," he said.

She gave him a look. "I don't need irony right now."

"Not irony," he said pleasantly. "That could have gone a *lot* worse."

"I don't see how."

"Oh, I knew they wouldn't agree with you this time around. But they listened to you. You gave them things to think about. Everything you said will be a part of their calculations from now on." He looked at her, amused appreciation glittering in his eyes. "You're damned impressive, I must say. Standing there all alone staring at those people as if they'd just come up from the sewer smelling of shit." He shook his head. "And I have no idea how you do that thing with your voice. I could have sworn when I met you that you were born in Riverside."

"There's a reason I got picked for this job," Sula said.

There was a moment of silence as they all negotiated the front door of the club. This time, at least, Macnamara didn't try to slam the door on Casimir. Score one, she thought, for civility.

The delay at the door gave Julien time to catch up. He caught his breath in the copper-plated corridor outside, then turned to Sula. "Sorry about that," he said. "Better luck next time, hey?"

"I'm sure you did your best," Sula said. It was all she could do not to snarl.

"Tan-dau got wounded in an assassination attempt last year, and he's not game for new adventures," Julien said. "Sagas isn't a Daimong to take chances. And Pops," he gave a rueful smile, and shook his head, "Pops didn't get where he is by sticking his neck out."

"And Patel?" Sula asked.

Julien laughed. "He'd have followed you, you heard him. He'd like to fight the Naxids just for the love, like he said. But the commission's rulings are always unanimous, and he had to fall in line."

They descended the moving stairs. Sula marched to the doors and walked out onto the street. The pavement was wet, and a fresh smell was in the air: there had been a brief storm while she was conducting her interview.

"Where's a cab rank?" Sula asked.

"Around the corner," said Julien, pointing. He hesitated. "Say—I'm sorry about today, you know. I'd like to make it up to you."

Can you raise an army? Sula thought savagely. But she turned to Julien and said, "That would be very nice."

"Tomorrow night?" Julien said. "Come to my restaurant for dinner? It's called Two Sticks, and it's off Harmony Square. The cook's a Cree and he's brilliant."

Sula had to wonder if the Cree chef thought it was his own restaurant, not Julien's, but this was no time to ask questions of that kind. She agreed to join Julien for dinner at 24:01.

"Shall I pick you up?" Casimir said. "Or are you still in transit from one place to another?"

"I'm *always* in transit," Sula lied, "and now you know why. I'll meet you at the club."

"Care to go out tonight?"

Sula decided she was too angry to play a cliqueman's girl tonight. "Not tonight," she said. "I've got to assassinate a judge."

Casimir was taken aback. "Good luck with that," he said.

She kissed him. "See you tomorrow."

She walked with Macnamara to the cab rank and got a cab. He sat next to Sula in the seat, arms crossed, staring straight forward. One muscle in his jaw worked continually.

"So what's *your* problem?" Sula demanded.

"Nothing," he said. "My lady."

"Good!" she said. "Because if there's anything I don't need, it's *more fucking problems*."

They sat in stony silence. Sula had the cab let her off two streets from her apartment. Rain had started again, and she had to sprint, her jacket pulled over her head.

Inside she tossed the wet wig onto the back of her chair and combed her short, dyed hair. She considered checking the news, but decided against it, knowing the news would only further irritate her. She settled for a long bath instead.

After her bath she wrapped herself in a robe and went to the front room. The rain was still pouring down. For a long moment she watched the beads of water that snaked down the window.

While watching the water an idea occurred to her.

"Ah hah," she said. The idea seemed an attractive one. She examined it carefully, probing it with her mind like a tongue examining the gap left by a missing tooth.

The idea began to seem better and better. She got a fresh piece of paper and a pen and outlined it, along with all possible ramifications.

There wasn't a problem that she could see. Nor a way it could be traced to her.

She destroyed the paper, leaving no evidence of her scheme. She looked at her right thumb, the thick pad of scar tissue where her print had once been.

It was very important that she not leave her fingerprints on this one.

In the morning she made deliveries with Spence and Macnamara. Macnamara was a little stiff but at least he wasn't sulking too visibly.

In the afternoon she went to the Petty Mount for a shopping expedition, and wore the result to meet Casimir at the Cat Street club. She was late, and as she approached the club with her large shoulder bag banging her hip with every stride, she found Casimir pacing the pavement next to the apricot-colored car. He was scowling down at the ground, his coat floating behind him like a cloak.

He looked up at her, and relief flooded his face. Then he saw how she was dressed, in a long coat, black covered with shiny six-pointed parti-colored stars, like a rainbow snowfall.

"You got a coat like mine," he said, surprised.

"Yes. We need to talk."

"We can talk in the car." He stepped toward the car door.

"No. I need more privacy than that. Let's try your office."

Petulance tugged at his lip. "We're already late."

"Julien will be all right. His chef is brilliant."

He nodded as if he understood this remark and followed her through the club. There were few patrons at this early hour, mostly quiet drinkers at the bar or workers who hadn't managed to get home in time for dinner.

Sula bounded up the metal stairs leading to Casimir's office. "How did the judge thing go?" he asked.

Sula had to search her mind to recall the story that, in her annoyance, she'd told him the day before. "Postponed," she said.

He let her into his office. "Is that what you need to talk about? Because even though Sergius said I wasn't supposed to help you, there are a few things I can do that Sergius doesn't need to know about. Because—oh, damn."

They had entered his office, the spotless black-and-white room, and Sula had thrown her bag on a sofa and opened her coat to reveal that she wore nothing underneath it but stockings and her shoes.

"Damn." Casimir repeated. His eyes traveled over her. "Damn, you're beautiful."

"Don't just stand there," Sula said.

It was the first time she had set out to please a man so totally and for so long. She moved Casimir over the room from one piece of furniture to the other. She took full advantage of the large, oversoft chairs. She used lips and tongue and fingertips, skin and scent, whispers and laughter. There was something whorish about it, she supposed, though her own violent, mercifully brief encounter with whoring had been far more sordid and unpleasant than this.

She kept Casimir busy for an hour and a half, until the chiming of his comm grew far too insistent. He rose from one of the sofas, where he was sprawled with Sula on top of him, and made his way to his desk.

"Audio only," he told the comm. "Answer. Yes, what is it?"

"Julien's arrested," said an unknown voice.

Sula sat up, an expression of concern on her face.

"When?" Casimir barked. "Where?"

"A few minutes ago, at the Two Sticks. He was there with Veronika."

Calculation burned in Casimir's gaze. "Was it the police, or the Fleet?"

The voice shifted to a higher, more urgent register. "It was the *Legion*. They took *everybody*."

Casimir stared intently at the far wall as if it held a puzzle he needed badly to put together. Sula rose and quietly walked to where her large shoulder bag waited. She opened it and began to withdraw clothing.

"Does Sergius know?" Casimir asked.

"He's not at his office. That's the only number I have for him."

"Right. Thanks. I'll call him myself."

Casimir knew he couldn't get away with a call to Sergius that had the video suppressed, so he put on a shirt and combed his hair. He spoke in low tones and Sula heard little of what was said. She finished dressing, took a pistol from her bag, and stuck it in her waistband behind her back.

Casimir finished his phone call. He looked at her with somber eyes.

"You'd better make yourself scarce," Sula said. "They might be going after all of you."

"That's what Sergius told me," he said.

"Or maybe," Sula's eyes narrowed, "they're after *you*, and they went to the Two Sticks thinking you'd be there."

"Or they might be after *you*," Casimir said, "and Julien and I are both incidental."

"That hadn't occurred to me," she said.

Casimir began to draw on his clothing. "This looks bad," he said. "But maybe you'll get what you want."

She looked at him.

"War," he explained, "between us and the Naxids."

"That *had* occurred to me," she said.

It had occurred to her the previous night, in fact, while she gazed at raindrops coursing down the window. Which was why, that morning, she'd gone to a public comm unit. She wore a worker's coveralls and the blonde wig and a wide-brimmed hat pulled down over her face, and she'd taken the hat off her head and put it over the unit's camera before she manually punched in the code that would connect her to the Legion of Diligence informer line.

"I want to give some information," she said. "An anarchist cell is meeting tonight in a restaurant called the Two Sticks, off Harmony Square. They are planning sabotage. The meeting is set for twenty-four and one, in a private room. Don't tell the local police, because they're corrupt and would warn the saboteurs."

She'd used the Earth accent that had once amused Caro Sula. She walked away from the comm without removing her hat from the camera pickup.

She must have been convincing because Julien was now under arrest.

"How shall I contact you?" Sula asked Casimir.

He adjusted his trousers, then gave her a code.

Sula nodded. "Got it."

He gave her a quizzical look. "You don't need to write it down?"

"I compose a mental algorithm that will allow me to remember the number," she said. "It's what I do with everyone's numbers."

He blinked. "Clever trick," he said.

She kissed him. "Yes," she said. "A very clever trick."

The next day the Naxids went berserk. Someone with a rifle went onto a building overlooking the Axtattle Parkway, the main highway that connected Zanshaa City with the Naxids' landing field at Wi-hun. The sniper waited for a convoy of Naxid vehicles to go by, then shot the driver of the first vehicle. Because the vehicles were using the automated lanes, the vehicle cruised on under computer control with a dead driver behind the controls. Then the sniper shot the next driver, and the next.

By the time the Naxids got things sorted out at least eight Naxids were dead, and more wounded. By way of retaliation they decided to shoot fifty-one hostages for every dead Naxid. Sula had no idea how they decided on fifty-one.

Casimir, who heard the news before anyone else, called Sula shortly after dawn to tell her to stay off the streets, and she spent the day in the apartment with a book of mathematical puzzles. Casimir called again after nightfall. "Can we meet?" he asked.

"Is it safe to go out?"

"The police have finished rounding up new hostages to replace the ones they shot today, and they're back to processing ration cards. But just in case I'll send a car."

She told him to pick her up at the local train stop. The car was a dark Hunhao sedan with one of the Torminel bodyguards at the controls. He took her to a small residential street on the edge of a Cree neighborhood—she saw Cree males on the streets exercising their quadruped females, who bounded about them like large puppies.

Casimir was in the apartment of a smiling, elderly couple who apparently did very well for themselves renting out their spare room as a safe house. The room was spacious and comfortable, with flower pots on the window sills, fringed throw rugs, the scent of potpourri, family pictures on the walls, and a macramé border around the wall video. The remains of Casimir's dinner sat on a tray along with a half-empty bottle of sparkling wine.

Sula kissed him hello, and put her arms around him. His flesh was warm. His cologne had a pleasant earthy scent.

"I think we've got a false alarm," Casimir said. "The Legion doesn't seem to be after me. Or Sergius, or anyone but Julien. There haven't been any raids. No inquiries. Nobody's been seen doing surveillance."

"That may change if Julien talks," Sula said.

Casimir drew back. His face hardened. It was as if she'd just challenged the manhood of the whole Riverside Clique.

"Julien won't talk," he said. "He's a good boy."

"You don't know what they're going to do to him. The Naxids are serious. We can't count on anything."

Casimir's lips gave a scornful twitch. "Julien grew up with Sergius Bakshi beating the crap out of him twice a week—and not for any reason, either, just for the sheer hell of it. You think Julien's going to be scared of the Naxids after *that*?"

Sula considered Sergius Bakshi's dead predator eyes and large pale listless hands and thought that Casimir had a point.

"So they won't get a confession from Julien. There's still Veronika."

Casimir shook his head. "Veronika doesn't know anything." He gave her a pointed look. "She doesn't know about *you*."

"But she knows Julien was expecting the two of us for dinner. And the Naxids will have seen that Julien was sitting at a table set for four."

Casimir shrugged. "They'll have my name and half of yours. They'll have a file on me and nothing on you. You're not in any danger."

"It's not me I'm worried about," Sula said.

He looked at her for a moment, then softened. "I'm being careful," he said in a subdued voice. He glanced around at the room. "I'm here, aren't I? In this little room, running my criminal empire by remote control."

Sula grinned at him. He grinned back. "Would you like something to eat or drink?" he asked.

"Whatever kind of soft drink they have would be fine."

He carried out his dinner tray. Sula toured the room, tidied a few of Casimir's belongings that had been carelessly laid down, then took off her shoes and sat on the floor. Casimir returned with two bottles of Citrine Fling. He seemed surprised to find Sula on the floor but joined her without comment. He handed her a bottle and touched it with his own. The resinous material made a light thud rather than a crystal ringing sound. He made a face.

"Here's to our exciting evening," he said.

"We'll have to make all the excitement ourselves," Sula said.

His eyes glittered. "Absolutely." He took a sip of his drink, then gave her a reflective look. "I know even less about Lady Sula than I do about Gredel."

She looked at him. "What do you want to know?"

There was a troubled look in his eye. "That story about your parents being executed. I suppose that was something that you said to get close to me."

Sula shook her head. "My parents were executed when I was young. Flayed."

He was surprised. "Really?"

"You can look it up if you want to. I'm in the military because it's the only job I'm permitted."

"But you're still a Peer."

"Yes. But as Peers go, I'm poor. All the family's wealth and property were confiscated." She looked at him. "You've probably got scads more money than I do."

And, she thought, *you're not the first high-class criminal I've slept with, either.*

Casimir was even more surprised. "I've never met a whole lot of Peers, but you always get the impression they're rolling in it."

"I'd like to have enough to roll in." She laughed, took a sip of her Fling. "Tell me. If they don't find Julien guilty of anything, what happens to him?"

"The Legion? They'll try to scare the piss out of him, then let him go."

Sula considered this. "Are the Naxids letting *anyone* go at all? Or does everyone they pick up for any reason join the hostage population in the lockups?"

He looked at her and ran a pensive thumb down his jaw. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Plus he could be hostage for his father's good behavior."

Casimir was thoughtful.

"Where would they send him?" Sula asked.

"Anywhere. The Blue Hatches, the Reservoir. Any jail or police station." He frowned. "Certain police stations he could walk right out of."

"Let's hope he gets sent to one of those, then."

"Yes. Let's."

His eyes were troubled.

Good, she thought. There were certain thoughts she wanted him to dwell on for a while.

The next afternoon Sula was in the High City selling cocoa and gathering intelligence. When she returned to Riverside she received a call from Casimir telling her that Julien had been cleared of suspicion by the Legion of Diligence, but that he was remaining in custody as a hostage. "He's in the Reservoir Prison, damn it," Casimir said. "There's no way we can get him out of there."

Calculations shimmered through Sula's mind. "Let me think about that," she said.

There was a moment of silence. Then, "Should we get together and talk?"

There were certain things one shouldn't say over a comm, and they were skating right along the edge.

"Not yet," Sula said. "I've got some research to do first."

She spent some time in public databases, researching the intricacies of the Zanshaa legal system, and more time with back numbers of the *Forensic Register*, the publication of the Zanshaa Legal Association. More time was spent seeing who in the *Register* had left Zanshaa with the old government and who hadn't.

Having gathered her data, Sula called Casimir and told him she needed him to set up a meeting with Sergius.

Since Sergius and Casimir had resumed their normal lives after the Legion had released Julien to the prison system, Sula was taken to meet Sergius in his office, on the second floor of an unremarkable building in the heart of Riverside.

She and Casimir passed through an anteroom of flunkies and hulking guards, all of whom she regarded with patrician hauteur, and into

Sergius's own office, where Sergius rose to greet her. The office was as unremarkable as the building, with scuffed floors and secondhand furniture and the musty smell of things that had been left lying too long in corners.

People with real power, Sula thought, didn't need to show it.

Sergius took her hand, and though the touch of his big hand was light she could sense the restrained power in his grip.

"What may I do for you, Lady Sula?" he asked.

"Nothing right now," Sula said. "Instead, I hope to be of service to you."

The ruthless eyes flicked to Casimir, who returned an expression meant to convey that he knew. Sergius returned his attention to Sula.

"I appreciate your thinking of me," he said. "Please sit down."

At least, Sula thought, she got to sit down this time. Sergius began to move behind his desk again.

"I believe I can get Julien out of the Reservoir," Sula said.

Sergius stopped, then turned his round head toward her. For the first time she saw emotion in his dark eyes, a glimpse into a black void of deep-seated desire that seemed all the more frightening in a man who normally seemed bereft of emotion.

He wanted his son back. Whether Sergius desired Julien's return because he loved his son, or because his son was a mere possession that some caprice of fate had taken from him, it was clear that the deep, burning hunger was there, a need as clear and primal and rapacious as a hungry panther for his dinner.

Sergius looked at her for a long moment, the need burning in his eyes, and then he recovered himself, straightened, and sat in his shabby chair. By the time he clasped his big pale hands on the desk in front of him, his face had again gone blank.

"That's interesting," he said.

Sula sat deliberately in one of the two seats set before the desk. "I want you to understand that I can't set Julien at liberty," she said. "I believe I can get him transferred to the holding cells at the Riverside police station, or to any other place that suits you. You'll have to get him out of there yourself.

"I'll also provide official identification for Julien that will allow him to move freely, but of course—" Here she looked into the unreadable eyes. "He'll be a fugitive until the Naxids are removed from power."

Sergius held her gaze for a moment, then nodded.

"How may I repay you for this favor?" he asked.

Sula suppressed a smile. She had her list well prepared.

"The secret government maintains a business enterprise used to transfer munitions and the like from one place to another. It's operating under the cover of a food distribution service. Since food distribution is about to become illegal, I'd like to be able to operate this enterprise under your protection, and without the usual fees."

Sula wondered if she was imagining the hint of a smile that played about Sergius Bakshi's lips. "Agreed," he said.

"I would also like ten Naxids to die."

One eyebrow gave a twitch. "Ten?"

"Ten, and of a certain quality. Naxids in the Patrol, the Fleet, or the Le-

gion, all of officer grade; or civil servants with ranks of CN6 or higher. And it must be clear that they've been murdered—they can't seem to die in accidents."

His voice was cold. "You wish this done when?"

"It's not a precondition. The Naxids may die within any reasonable amount of time, after Julien is released."

Sergius seemed to thaw a little. "You will provoke the Naxids into one massacre after another."

She gave a little shrug and tried to match with her own the glossy inhumanity of the other's eyes.

"That is incidental," she said.

Sergius gave an amused, twisted little smile. It was as out of place on his round immobile face as a bray of laughter.

"I'll agree to this," he said. "But I want it clear that I'll pick the targets."

"Certainly," Sula said.

"Anything else?"

"I'd like an extraction team on hand, just in case my project doesn't go well. I don't expect we'll need them, though."

"Extraction team?" Sergius's lips formed the unaccustomed syllables, and then his face relaxed into the face he probably wore at home, a face that was still, in truth, frightening enough.

"I suppose you'd better tell me about this plan of yours," he said.

There were three sets of people who had the authority to move prisoners from one location to another. There was the prison bureaucracy itself, which housed the prisoners, shuttled them to and from interrogations and trials, and made use of their labor in numberless factories and agricultural communes. All those with the authority to sign off on prisoner transfers now consisted entirely of Naxids. Sergius apparently hadn't yet gotten any of these on his payroll, otherwise Julien would have been shifted out of the Reservoir by now.

The second group consisted of Judges of the High Court and of Final Appeal, but all these had been evacuated before the Naxid fleet arrived. The new administration had replaced them all with Naxids.

The third group were Judges of Interrogation. It was not a prestigious posting, and some had been evacuated and some hadn't. Apparently Sergius didn't have any of these in his pocket, either.

Lady Mitsuko Inada was one of those who hadn't left Zanshaa. She lived in Green Park, a quiet, wealthy enclave on the west side of the city. The district had none of the ostentation or flamboyant architecture of the High City—probably none of the houses had more than fifteen or sixteen rooms. Those buildings still occupied by their owners tried to radiate a comfortable air of wealth and security, but were undermined by the untended gardens and shuttered windows of the neighboring buildings, abandoned by their owners who had fled, either to another star system or, failing that, to the country.

Lady Mitsuko's dwelling was on the west side of the Park, the least expensive and least fashionable. It was built of gray fieldstone, with a green alloy roof, an onion dome of greenish copper, and two ennobling sets of

chimney pots. The garden in front was mossy and frondy, with ponds and fountains. There were willows in the back, which suggested more ponds there.

Peers constituted about two percent of the empire's population, and as a class controlled more than ninety percent of its wealth. But there was immense variation within the order of Peers, ranging from individuals who controlled the wealth of entire systems to those who lived in genuine poverty. Lady Mitsuko was on the lower end of the scale. Her job didn't entitle her to an evacuation, and neither did her status within the Inada clan.

All Peers, even the poor ones, were guaranteed an education and jobs in the Fleet, civil service, or bar. It was possible that Lady Mitsuko had worked herself up to her current status from somewhere lower.

Sula rather hoped she had. If Lady Mitsuko had a degree of social insecurity, it might work well for Sula's plans.

Macnamara drove Sula to the curb before the house. He was dressed in a dark suit and brimless cap, and looked like a professional driver. He opened Sula's door from the outside, and helped her out with a hand gloved in Devajjo leather.

"Wait," she told him, though of course she knew he would wait, because that was the plan.

Neither of them were looking at the van that cruised along the far side of the park, packed with heavily armed Riverside Clique gunmen.

Sula straightened her shoulders—she was Fleet again, in her blonde wig—and marched up the walk and over the ornamental bridge to the house door. With gloved fingers—no fingerprints—she reached for the grotesque ornamental bronze head near the door and touched the shiny spot that would announce a visitor to anyone inside the house, then removed her uniform cap from under her arm and put it on her head. She now wore her full dress uniform of viridian green, with her lieutenant's shoulder boards, glossy shoes, and her medals.

Her sidearm was a weight against one hip.

To avoid being overconspicuous, she wore over her shoulders a nondescript overcoat, which she removed as soon as she heard footsteps in the hall. She held it over the pistol and its holster.

The singing tension in her nerves kept her back straight, her chin high. She had to remember that she was a Peer. Not a Peer looking down her nose at cliquemen, but a Peer interacting with another of her class.

That had always been the hardest, to pretend that she was born to this.

A female servant opened the door, a middle-aged Terran. She wasn't in livery, but in neat, subdued civilian clothes.

Lady Mitsuko, Sula concluded, possessed little in the way of social pretension.

Sula walked past the surprised servant and into the hallway. The walls had been plastered beige, with little works of art in ornate frames, and her shoes clacked on deep gray tile.

"Lady Caroline to see Lady Mitsuko, please," she said, and took off her cap.

The maidservant closed the door and held out her hands for the cap and overcoat. Sula looked at her. "Go along, now," she said.

The servant looked doubtful, then gave a little bow and trotted into the interior of the house. Sula examined herself in a hall mirror of polished nickel asteroid material, adjusted the tilt of one of her medals, and waited.

Lady Mitsuko appeared, walking quickly. She was younger than Sula had expected, in her earlier thirties, and very tall. Her body was angular and she had a thin slash of a mouth and a determined jaw that suggested that, as a Judge of Interrogation, she was disinclined to let prisoners get away with much. Her dark hair was worn long and caught in a tail behind, and she wore casual clothes. She dabbed with a napkin at a food spot on her blouse.

"Lady Caroline?" she said. "I'm sorry," she said. "I was just giving the twins their supper." She held out her hand, but there was a puzzled frown on her face as she tried to work out whether or not she had seen Sula before.

Sula startled Lady Mitsuko by bracing in salute, her chin high. "Lady Magistrate," she said. "I come on official business. Is there somewhere we may speak privately?"

Lady Mitsuko stopped, her hand still outheld. "Yes," she said. "Certainly."

She took Sula to her office, a small room that still had the slight aroma of the varnish used on the light-colored shelves and furniture of natural wood.

"Will you take a seat, my lady?" Mitsuko said as she closed the door. "Shall I call for refreshment?"

"That won't be necessary," Sula said. "I won't be here long." She stood before a chair but didn't sit, and waited to speak until Lady Mitsuko stepped behind her desk.

"You have my name slightly wrong," Sula said. "I'm not Lady Caroline, but rather Caroline, Lady Sula."

Lady Mitsuko's eyes darted suddenly to Sula, and then she froze with one hand on the back of her office chair. Her mouth parted slightly with surprise.

"Do you recognize me?" Sula prompted.

"I . . . don't know." Mitsuko pronounced the words as if they belonged to a foreign language.

Sula reached into a pocket and produced her Fleet ID. "You may examine my identification if you wish," she said. "I'm on a mission for the secret government."

Lady Mitsuko pressed the napkin to her heart. The other hand reached for Sula's identification.

"The secret government . . ." she said softly, as if to herself.

She sank slowly into her chair, her eyes on Sula's ID. Sula sat and placed her overcoat and hat in her lap. She waited for Lady Mitsuko's eyes to lift from the ID, and spoke.

"We require your cooperation," she said.

Lady Mitsuko slowly extended her arm and held out Sula's identification.

"What do you—what does the secret government want?" she asked.

Sula leaned forward and took her ID. "The government requires you to transfer twelve hostages from the Reservoir Prison to the holding cells at the Riverside police station. I have a list ready—will you set your comm to receive?"

Speaking slowly, as if in a daze, Lady Mitsuko readied her desk comm. Sula triggered her sleeve display to send the names of Julien, Veronika, nine prisoners chosen at random from the official posted list of hostages, and—just because she was feeling mischievous when she made the list—the Two Sticks' Cree cook.

"We expect the order to be sent tomorrow," Sula said. She cleared her throat in a businesslike way. "I am authorized to say that after the return of the legitimate government, your loyalty will be rewarded. On the other hand, if the prisoner transfer does not take place, you will be assassinated."

Mitsuko's look was scandalized. She stared at Sula for a blank second, and then she seemed to notice for the first time the holstered pistol at Sula's hip. Her eyes jumped away, and then she made a visible effort to collect herself.

"What reason shall I give for the transfer?" she said.

"Whatever seems best to you. Perhaps they need to be interrogated in regard to certain crimes. I'm sure you can come up with a good reason." Sula rose from her chair. "I shan't keep you," she said.

And best regards to the twins. Sula considered adding that, a clear malicious threat to the children, but decided it was unnecessary.

She rather thought that she and Lady Mitsuko had reached an understanding.

Mitsuko escorted her to the door. Her movements were still a bit disconnected, as if her nervous system hadn't quite caught up with events. At least she didn't look as if she'd panic and run for the comm as soon as the door had closed behind Sula's back.

Sula threw the overcoat over her shoulders. "Allow me to wish you a good evening, Lady Magistrate," she said.

"Um—good evening, Lady Sula," said Lady Mitsuko.

Macnamara waited in the car, and leaped out to open the door as soon as Sula appeared. She tried not to run over the ornamental bridge and down the path, and instead managed a brisk, military clip.

The car hummed away from the curb as fast as its four electric engines permitted, and made the first possible turn. By the time the vehicle had gone two streets, Sula had squirmed out of her military tunic and silver-braided trousers. The blouse she'd worn beneath the tunic was suitable as casual summer wear, and she jammed her legs into a pair of bright summery pantaloons. The military kit and the blonde wig went into a laundry bag. The holster shifted to the small of Sula's back.

The van carrying the extraction team roared up behind, and both vehicles pulled to a stop: Sula and Macnamara transferred to the van, along with the laundry bag. Another driver hopped into the car—he would drive the car to the parking stand of the local train, where it could be retrieved at leisure.

As Sula jumped through the van's clamshell door, she saw the extrac-

tion team, Spence, Casimir, and four burly men from Julien's crew, all bulky with armor and with weapons in their laps. Another pair sat behind the windscreen in front. The interior of the van was blue with tobacco smoke. Laughter burst from her at their grim look.

"Put the guns away," she said. "We won't be needing them."

Triumph blazed through her. She pulled Macnamara into the van, and then because there were no more seats dropped onto Casimir's lap. As the door hummed shut and the van pulled away, Sula put her arms around Casimir's neck and kissed him.

Sergius and the whole Riverside Clique couldn't have managed what she'd just done. They could have sniffed around the halls of justice for someone to bribe, and probably already had without success; but none of them could have convinced a Peer and a judge to sign a transfer order of her own free will. If they'd approached Lady Mitsuko, she would have brushed them off; if they'd threatened her, she would have ordered their arrest.

It took a Peer to unlock a Peer's cooperation—and not with a bribe, but with an appeal to legitimacy and class solidarity.

Casimir's lips were warm, his breath sweet. Macnamara, without a seat, crouched on the floor behind the driver and looked anywhere but at Sula sitting on Casimir's lap. The cliquemen nudged each other and grinned. Spence watched with frank interest.

The driver kept off the limited-access expressways and onto the smaller streets where he had options. Even so he managed to get stuck in traffic. The van inched forward as the minutes ticked by, and then the driver cursed.

"Damn! Roadblock ahead!"

In an instant Sula was off Casimir's lap and peering forward. Ahead she could see Naxids in the black-and-yellow uniforms of the Motor Patrol. Their four-legged bodies snaked eerily from side to side as they moved up and down the line of vehicles, peering at the drivers. One vehicle was stopped while the Patrol rummaged through its cargo compartment. The van was on a one-way street, its two lanes choked with traffic: it was impossible to turn around.

Sula's heart was thundering in her chest as it never had when confronting Sergius or Lady Mitsuko. Ideas flung themselves at her mind, and burst from her lips in not-quite-complete sentences.

"Place to park?" she said urgently. "Garage? Pretend to make a delivery?"

The answer was no. Parking was illegal, there was no garage to turn into, and all the businesses on the street were closed at this hour.

Casimir's shoulder clashed with hers as he came forward to scan the scene before them. "How many?"

"I can see seven," Sula said. "My guess is that there are two or three more we can't see from here. Say ten." She pointed ahead, to an open-topped vehicle run partly up onto the sidewalk, with a machine gun mounted on the top and a Naxid standing behind it, the sun gleaming off his black beaded scales.

"Macnamara," she said. "That gun's your target."

Macnamara had been one of the best shots on the training course, and

his task was critical. The gunner didn't even have to touch his weapon: all he had to do was put the reticule of his targeting system onto the van and press the *go* button: the gun itself would handle the rest, and riddle the vehicle with a couple of thousand rounds. The gunner had to be taken out first.

And then the driver of the vehicle, because he could operate the gun from his own station.

A spare rifle had been brought for Sula, and she reached for it. There was no spare suit of armor and she felt the sudden hollow in her chest where the bullets would lodge.

"We've got two police coming down the line toward us. One on either side. You two—" She indicated the driver and the other man in the front of the van, "You'll pop them right at the start. The rest of us will exit the rear of the vehicle—Macnamara first, to give him time to set up on the gunner. The rest of you keep advancing—you're as well-armed as the Patrol, and you've got surprise. If things don't work out, we'll split up into small groups—Macnamara and Spence, you're with me. We'll hijack vehicles in nearby streets and get out as well as we can."

Her mouth was dry by the time she finished, and she licked her lips with a sandpaper tongue. Casimir was grinning at her.

"Nice plan," he said.

Total fuckup, she thought, but gave what she hoped was an encouraging nod. She crouched on the rubberized floor of the van and readied her rifle.

"Better turn the transponder on," Casimir said, and the driver gave a start, then gave a code phrase to the van's comm unit.

Every vehicle in the empire was wired to report its location at regular intervals to a central data store. The cliquemen's van had been altered so as to make this an option rather than a requirement, and the function had been turned off while the van was on its mission to Green Park. An unresponsive vehicle, however, was bound to be suspicious in the eyes of the Patrol.

"Good thought," Sula breathed.

"Here they come." Casimir ducked down behind the seat. He gave Sula a glance—his cheeks were flushed with color, and his eyes glittered like diamonds. His grin was brilliant.

Sula felt her heart surge in response. She answered his grin, and then she felt that wasn't enough. She lunged across the distance between them and kissed him hard.

Live or die, she thought. Whatever came, she was ready.

"They're pinging us," the driver growled. One of the Patrol had raised a hand comm and activated the transponder.

The van coasted forward for a few seconds, then halted. Sula heard the front windows whining open to make it easier to shoot the police on either side.

The van had a throat-tickling odor of tobacco and terror. From her position on the floor she could see the driver holding a pistol alongside his seat. His knuckles were white on the grip. Her heart sped like a turbine in her chest. Tactical patterns played themselves out in her mind.

She heard the footfalls of one of the Patrol, walking close. She kept her eyes on the driver's pistol. The second it moved, she would act.

Then the driver gave a startled grunt, and the van surged forward. The knuckles relaxed on the pistol.

"She waved us through," the driver said.

There was a moment of disbelieving silence, and then Sula heard the rustle and shift of ten tense, frightened, heavily armed people all relaxing at once.

The van accelerated. Sula let the breath sigh slowly from her lungs, and put her rifle carefully down on the floor of the vehicle. She turned to the others and saw at least six cigarettes being lit. Then she laughed and sat heavily on the floor.

Casimir turned to her, his expression filled with a kind of savage wonder. "That was lucky," he said.

Sula didn't answer. She only looked at him, at the pulse throbbing in his neck, the slight glisten of sweat at the base of his throat, the fine mad glitter in his eyes. She had never wanted anything so much.

"Lucky," he said again.

She didn't touch Casimir till they reached Riverside, when the van pulled up outside the Hotel of Many Blessings. Careful not to touch him, she followed him out of the van—the others would store the weapons—and then went with him to his suite, keeping half a pace apart on the elevator.

He turned to her, and she reached forward and tore open his shirt so that she could lick the burning adrenaline from his skin.

His frenzy equaled hers. Their blood smoked with the excitement of shared danger, and the only way to relieve the heat was to spend it on each other.

They laughed. They shrieked. They snarled . . . They tumbled over each other like lion cubs, claws only half-sheathed. They pressed skin to skin so hard that it seemed as if they were trying to climb into one another.

The fury spent itself some time after midnight. Casimir called room service for something to eat. Sula craved chocolate, but there was none to be had. For a brief moment she considered breaking into her own warehouse to satisfy her hunger.

"For once," he said, as he cut his omelet with a fork and slid half of it onto Sula's plate, "for once you didn't sound like you came from Riverside."

"Yes?" Sula raised an eyebrow.

"And you didn't sound like Lady Sula either. You had some other accent, one I'd never heard before."

"It's an accent I'll use only with you," Sula said.

The accent of the Fabs, on Spannan. The voice of Gredel.

Lady Mitsuko signed the transfer order that morning. Transport wasn't arranged till the afternoon, so Julien and the other eleven arrived at the Riverside station late in the afternoon, about six.

Sergius Bakshi had a long-standing arrangement with the captain of the Riverside station. Julien's freedom cost two hundred zeniths. Veronika cost fifty, and the Cree cook a mere fifteen.

Julien would have been on his way by seven, but it was necessary to wait for the Naxid supervisor, the one who approved all the ration cards, to leave.

Still suffering from his interrogation, Julien limped to liberty, on the night that the Naxids announced that the Committee to Save the Praxis, their own government, was already on its way from Naxas to take up residence in the High City of Zanshaa. A new Convocation would be assembled, composed both of Naxids and other races, to be the supreme governing body of their empire.

"Here's hoping we can give them a hot landing," Sula said. She was among the guests at Sergius's welcome-home dinner, along with Julien's mother, a tall, gaunt woman, forbidding as a statue, who burst into tears at the sight of him.

Veronika was not present. Interrogation had broken a cheekbone and the orbit of one eye: Julien had called a surgeon, and in the meantime had provided painkillers.

"I'll give them a welcome," Julien said grimly, through lips that had been bruised and cut. "I'll rip the bastards to bits."

Sula looked across the table at Sergius, and silently mimed the word "ten" at him. He smiled at her, and when he looked at Julien the smile turned hard.

"Ten," he said. "Why stop there?"

Sula smiled. At last she had her army. Her own team of three plus a tough, disciplined order of killers who had decided—after a proper show of resistance—to be loved. ○



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Neal Asher's fifth novel, *Brass Man*, is just out from Macmillan (UK). He is working on a new book, provisionally titled *Polity Agent*. Neal's most recent story for us was the amusing "Strood" (December 2004). In his latest tale, he takes a sympathetic look at what it takes to win the race with . . .

MASON'S RATS

Neal Asher

The cartridges, with their environmentally friendly titanium shot, thunked into the shotgun with satisfying precision. Mason snapped it shut and with pursed lips viewed his sprawling farmyard. Where to start? Where would the killer stray be hiding? He hooked the shotgun under his arm and headed for the huge enclosed barns where grain handlers could still be heard at work. There would be the place, but he knew he would have to be careful where he fired. Micro-circuitry was robust, but not that robust, as he had discovered after blasting one of Smith's cybernetic rat traps, mistaking it for a rabbit. It had run home squealing and dropping chips like little black turds. He smiled to himself at the memory, then came suddenly to a stop, his smile fading. Perhaps that was it. Perhaps Smith had reprogrammed one of his traps to hunt cats, for revenge.

Mason's suspicions had only been aroused when the General had disappeared. The disappearance of the other two cats he had put down to other things. They could have found another home with a more ready food supply. He did not believe in giving them all they would want even though it was tax-deductible. He called it motivation. They were working cats after all. Another possibility that crossed his mind was that they had not been quick enough when the combine harvester had come round, and that he would find their remains when he came to do the baling. But not the General; that raggedy-eared moggy had been around for six years and knew the dangers. He also managed to grow fat on a steady diet of rats. Others might have thought the culprit a fox, but foxes don't attack cats. Cats, after all, have more natural armament than foxes. No, the

greatest killer of cats is other cats. Mason shook his head and continued on to the barns.

The doors to G1 slid back only halfway, then jammed. Mason was not surprised. He had not used them in two years. The lights worked all right, though, and he could easily see into the dusty interior. Before him was a mountain of alpha-wheat. He reached down and grabbed up a handful, gazed with satisfaction at the pea-sized grains, then tossed them to the floor as a handler came whirring past him. He frowned as he watched the bulky device. The handlers were the one inefficiency in the circuit. The grain went from the harvesters to the barns, then, by handlers, from the barns up the ramps to the silos. Mason would have liked one of the new harvesters with its fans that could blow the grain directly up fifty feet of ducting into the silos, but he did not have fifty million Euros to spare. Still with a sour expression, he again gazed up at the pile of wheat grain. It was then that he saw the grey shape crouching on top of it, regarding him with glittery, avid eyes.

Mason raised his shotgun, deciding on the instant that this was the stray. The creature turned to flee, and Mason hesitated as he realized that it was not a cat at all, but a huge rat. He lowered his gun as it scampered down the other side of the pile, a sweat breaking out all over him. No wonder the General had gone missing. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his face, then cautiously moved in. No way did he want to come suddenly upon a rat that size.

On the other side of the pile there was no rat. Fifty yards in front of him were the doors to G2. He trotted over to them and hit the opening button. The doors slid aside and a wedge of light was thrown into the darkness. The rat was there. It froze, pinned by light. Mason raised his gun to fire and saw that the rat had something round its middle. It looked almost like a tool belt. The shotgun kicked and the rat shot into the air with a shriek and spattering of blood, then hit the ground convulsing. Mason stepped aside and turned on all the lights. He scanned around as other large shapes fled amongst the grain piles, but he did not shoot at them. Right then he had only one cartridge left in his gun and a couple in his pocket, and did not feel altogether safe. He approached the dead rat.

Somehow the creature had managed to wrap a piece of canvas webbing around itself. At least this is what Mason told himself at first. But as he came to stand over it he realized that this was not a good enough explanation. The rat was wearing a tool belt, and hanging from it were tools fashioned from bone, wood, and old nails.

Mason reached down and hauled up the huge rat by its tail, then glanced around as he heard more movement. Raising his gun he backed out of G2, dragging the rat carcass with him. As he reached the door he detected movement and looked up. Crouched on one of the grain piles was another rat. There came a snapping sound and something cracked against the door beam and clattered to the floor. Mason peered down at the small crossbow bolt, swore, then got out of the barn as fast as he could.

* * *

"Now Mr. Mason, there's no need to upset yourself. Traptech can sort out your little problem."

Patronizing jerk, thought Mason, staring down at the deep-frozen rat corpse he had dumped on the table. Smith had recommended this man but Mason did not like him. The suit was the first thing that annoyed him. Mason had an aversion to anyone wearing a suit. He reckoned it was a certainty that this bloke had a pair of green rubber boots in the trunk of his company car. He looked up.

"Upset myself? Little problem? I've got armed rats in my barns and you call it a little problem?"

"Yes sir. Perhaps I am wrong to call it a little problem, but it is a problem we at Traptech are used to handling."

Mason could not believe he was having this discussion. The last he had heard about tool-using ability in the animal kingdom had been from a program about apes, who managed to break open nuts with rocks.

"Tell me again where they come from."

"As I said, man has become the greatest force of evolution. We are forcing intelligence on the animal kingdom. It is—"

Mason raised his hand before the Traptech rep could move into full bullshit mode. "Okay, what have you got for me?"

The suit smiled like a shark and pulled a thick catalog from his briefcase. Mason felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach—one he normally associated with the sight of little brown envelopes with windows in them. The suit opened the catalogue on the table next to the thawing rat and showed Mason a picture of something that looked like a security camera.

"This is the TT6, which we introduced only last year. It is a guided pulse laser with dual heat and movement sensors. Four of these in each of your two barns should solve your problem. Smith was most satisfied with them."

"How much?" asked Mason tiredly, then frowned at the answer. The new harvester retreated even further into the future.

The men from Traptech installed the TT6s in a day. Mason noted that they wore helmets, visors, and overalls with micromesh ring mail stitched in, and that one of them stood guard with a pump-action shotgun. The rats remained hidden, though. From the TT6s, the men ran an armored cable into his house to the farm computer. When all the work was completed the suit arrived to demonstrate the system.

"This is the control package," said the suit after loading two discs and plugging the cable into the computer's unused security circuit. "Now you can call up diagnostics on each TT6, find out if there have been any hits, and even get a view through each unit."

The computer screen flickered on and showed: HIT ON TT6 G1/3.

"Ah, marvelous," said the suit, and demonstrated how the view could be called up on that unit. The screen flickered again and showed the greenish infrared view of the inside of G1. Lying before one of the grain piles, smoke wisping from the laser punctures in its body, lay Mason's remaining cat.

"Ah . . . it would be advisable to keep other animals out of the barns. The sensors are set to pick up on animals within certain size parameters. Obviously they will miss humans but—"

"I will expect some sort of reduction for this," interrupted Mason, his teeth clenched.

On the first day the diagnostic program reported a malfunction and Mason could get no picture through that particular unit. It never occurred to him to be surprised. With his shotgun hooked under his arm he went to G1. On the floor before the TT6 one of the rats lay in a smoking heap. The TT6 was smoking as well though, two crossbow bolts impaling it. In the night two more were scrapped. In the morning Mason called up the suit.

"Ah," said the suit, inspecting the crossbow bolt shortly after he arrived, "this sometimes happens. Your best move now would be to get a mobile defense." He opened up the dread catalogue and pointed out something that looked like a foot-long chrome scorpion. "This is the TT15."

"Those TT6s are still under guarantee."

"I can give you a very reasonable exchange price with service contract and deferred payment, and though they are expensive, you will only need one TT15."

The TT15 arrived the next day. Just taking it out of its box gave Mason the creeps. After turning off the TT6s he took it into the barns, and turned it on. Immediately it scuttled into the shadows. Mason found himself fearing it more than he feared the rats, and he quickly went outside. Its homing beacon he placed by the compost heap. After half an hour the TT15 came out with a dead rat in its mandibles and dumped it by the beacon. Next to the tractor on which he was working Mason shuddered and turned back to his task. Later, as he sat on one of the tractor's tires and rolled himself a cigarette, he saw three rats run out of G1 with the chrome scorpion in pursuit.

He found himself hoping the rats would escape but, before they reached the polythene-wrapped straw bales, it had the slowest of them, caught it, crunched it, then like some horrible gun dog took it to the compost heap. However unpleasant the thing might look, Mason decided, it was damned efficient.

The men from Traptech came the following day to take down the TT6s. When they had finished, their foreman came to see Mason.

"Says here you had eight TT6s, mate."

"That's right. The rats scrapped four of them though."

"We know about that. We've got those four. Just that one of the good one's gone missin'. I'll have to report it, mate."

For the rest of the day, while he baled straw in the fields, Mason wondered confusedly where the missing TT6 could have gone. By evening he had figured it out and in a strange way was quite glad. As soon as he got back to the farmyard he fetched his shotgun and went with it into the barns.

It had been one hell of a fight in G1. The rats had swivel-mounted the TT6, using a couple of old bearings and a universal joint, on one of the grain handlers, and powered it from the handler's battery. Mason was impressed, but realized the rats had not taken into account the reflective surface of the TT15. They had obviously fired the laser many times, enough to have drained the handler's battery, but the TT15, though damaged, had not been immobilized. A battle with crossbow bolts and hand weapons had then ensued. The floor was littered with dead and dismembered rats, weapons, and silvery pieces of the TT15. Finally the rats had managed to shut the doors into G2 on it, trapping it, and there it remained, its motor whining periodically.

Mason walked over to the doors, opened them, then hit the lights for G2. The TT15 scuttled on into the barn, immediately zeroing in on movement at the further edge of the floor. Mason gazed across and saw a group of rats. Many of them were injured. Many of them were applying dressings and tying on splints. They all looked up at him, glittery eyed. He raised his shotgun and saw what could only be described as a look of fatalism come onto their ratty faces. He fired both barrels of the shotgun and blew the TT15 to scrap.

As he turned and left the barn shortly after, on his way to cancel the check he had sent to Traptech, Mason felt extremely pleased with himself—in fact, the happiest he had felt in days. The kind of rats he really hated wore suits and cost a damned sight more than a few handfuls of alpha-wheat. ○

SUPERMAN INOXYDABLE (D. 11-18-92 R.I.P.)

*Superman died today, victim
of a world grown too alien
for his own alien virtues—
goodness & right, honesty & trust.*

*The days when he vanquished Nazis
in his immaculate, flag-hued, skin-tight suit
have corroded away like Metropolis itself
into a grimy cyberpunk future,*

*a time when observable goodness
is viewed with cynical suspicion:
we know that anyone with those
chiseled good looks and that kind of power
would be wetting that spring-steel willy,
turning our Earth girls
on his inexhaustible spike
like game birds on a spit—
I mean, hey pal, wouldn't you?*

*No, Superman died just in time.
The boy scouts of today
are fondling the pieces in their pockets
and saving up someone else's grocery money
to buy a MAC-10 or an Uzi.
Jimmy is listening to gangsta rap
on his boombox, while Lois
is hooking on the side and watching
reruns of Thelma and Louise.
He just couldn't have adapted.
The Man of Steel today is Robo-Cop
or the Terminator who can rip
the still-beating heart from your body.*

*Still, I can't help hoping
that the Man of Steel will remain rustless
in his kryptonite tomb, that his virtue
will remain a stainless legend, that
in our time of greatest need
an earthquake will set him free
to rise again renewed
like King Arthur from the grave
and vanquish black-clad evil for us all.*

—DAVID LUNDE

Over forty of the author's short stories have appeared in such publications as *Asimov's*, *Interzone*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and *The Third Alternative*. Her most recent novels include *Nine Layers of Sky* and *Banner of Souls*. In her latest tale for *Asimov's*, we join a mother's painful search for her daughter in . . .

LA GRAN MUERTE

Liz Williams

"We didn't cross the border; the border crossed us. . . ."

—Chicana revolutionary slogan

1

"**D**oña Maria told me you could help me," I said, uncertainly. Perez lit a joint and sat back in the drift of smoke. The room was stifling: a windowless adjunct to the engine shop, filled with old machine parts and beer bottles. Outside, I could hear the incessant song of the cicadas sizzling in the dry grass. I wished I could be anywhere but here—as if wishing would turn one place into another, transform Ciudad Juarez into El Paso.

Perez murmured, "Perhaps I can. It depends what sort of help you want."

"To find my daughter. To cross the river."

"Ah," Perez said, with a rictus grin. "Crossing the river. . . . That's what they all say. Sooner or later." He spat into the corner of the room. "Wet-backs, they call them; once they reach El Paso. You know that, don't you? D'you know why?"

I nodded.

"It's never easy," Perez sighed. The grass was making him melancholic. He tipped his baseball cap further back on his head and looked up at the ceiling. "Wherever you want to get to . . . it's never easy."

"I've got money—pesos, dollars. I can pay."

"I'm sure you can. And I'm sure you will, but you see, Señora Ruiz, I have to be sure it's worth *my* while." He looked me up and down lazily.

His smile widened, but nothing about me could have interested him: a woman of forty-six, already old, with a pocket full of greasy dollars and the dust from the hills of Tenochitlan still staining the hem of her dress. I must have been the tenth person he had seen that day, wanting to cross the border. I didn't even know if he understood what I was talking about.

"The peso is a worthless currency," Perez said with an almost Castilian disdain. "Dollars—well, I might be interested. Possibly. What else can you offer me?"

"The highest price of all," I told him, fencing.

"Ah. Now that might be worth the considerable trouble and effort that this is going to cost me. . . . Do you understand what you're saying?" He reached across the table and gripped my wrist; his fingers were very pale against my darker skin, as though it was a ghost's hand that held me. Outside the window, the cicadas grew suddenly still. The day seemed to poise on a pivot.

"Listen to me, Lagrimas Ruiz. I'm what they call a coyote, because I arrange things that are not entirely—well, anyway, I'm not a philanthropist. And you're not quite what you pretend to be, I think. Not quite the respectable mama, trying to keep her family together in spite of the poverty. I've heard stories about you: about your political past, your revolutionary activities—the Nation of Aztlan. It seems we both know about the edges of the world, the margins. But I know more than you."

We stared at each other. I wondered if it had been Perez who had helped my daughter escape into the borderlands, head for El Paso to take a chance in a different world. I did not dare ask him; I was afraid of what he might say. Perez released my wrist and leaned back in his chair, adding conversationally, "You've made one border crossing already, haven't you?"

I nodded. It had been over twenty years ago, back at the turn of the century. I'd gone the same route: up through Ciudad Juarez into El Paso, hiding with eleven others in the back of a truck. I lasted two weeks, working in a greasy restaurant kitchen, before La Migra caught up with me and shipped me back to Mexico. I had been jailed for a short time, and interrogated. Those were sensitive times, when every illegal migrant worker was seen as an Aztlan terrorist and treated accordingly. Sometimes the authorities even got it right. I lowered my gaze, remembering.

"This will not be like that crossing," I heard Perez the coyote say. "These are different days. Life is even harder now, La Migra more vigilant than ever before."

"Will you help me or won't you?" I forced myself to say. My throat felt tight; as though the words didn't want to come. I remembered stepping out into El Paso after the journey; still sore and cramped from bumping about in the back of the unsprung truck. I remembered how it had looked in the early morning light: the tall buildings shining in a catch of sun, the sky clear as water above the shadows of the mountains. Ciudad Juarez is a city, too, but El Paso was different: the air cleaner, the streets scrubbed clean by comparison. A different world, to me.

Perez thought for a few minutes, taking a long drag on the joint, and then he shrugged as though he'd made up his mind.

"Well, then, if you're willing to pay . . ."

He knew I didn't have a choice. Somewhere ahead, over the river, my daughter Juanita was running from me, vanishing into another city, into America.

"All right," Perez said.

My ears were buzzing with the strain; the same sound as the cicadas had made in the scrub. My vision was filled with a haze that was the color of fresh blood. I gripped the edges of my chair until my knuckles burned.

"Now," Perez said. "Look at me—" and I looked up, straight down the barrel of the gun, just before he lowered it to my heart and fired.

2

I can't sleep here. Instead, I pretend. Whenever the twilight surges up like a cloud into the arid air, I lie down among the stones and close my eyes. With the return of the burning light, I rise and start walking again, searching for a sign of the city and my daughter. Perez was right. This is not like my first crossing, nothing like it at all. The *mezcla* shifts around me, resolving into an atrophied landscape where the sunless sky is the color of bone and the stones cast no shadows. The *mezcla* looks like nowhere, leaching everything of life and meaning. My grandmother told me that in the borderlands I must tell the *descansos*, the litany of life and loss, as often as I can. I must recite *las muertes chichitas*, the little deaths: each bloodmonth sacrifice, each passing heartache, and then *las muertes grandotes*, the greater deaths: my mother, my comrades of the failed revolution, and Juanita, and—last of all—myself. I must remind myself of who I am, in case I forget and slide further into the margins of the world that is the *mezcla*. I cannot afford to forget, not only for my own sake, but for my daughter's.

Perez's silver bullet, my link to Juanita, helps. It travels around my body, weaving me back together again. Last night, when the twilight deepened and I could no longer see, I slid my hand down to my breast and although there was still the stiffness of drying blood, the mouth of the wound had closed. And I thought: *I'm healed*, but I knew that it couldn't possibly be true, not here in the borderlands of the *mezcla*, the outskirts of the city. This is not a place of healing; only of suspension between life and death. And to enter into this place requires violence: murder and sacrifice.

My memories drift back, to where I lay sightless and dying on the floor of the engine shop. I could hear Perez tugging at my shirt, working fast, the knife tearing at the edges of the gunshot wound until he could reach in and grasp my heart. As he did so, he mumbled the words that would increase his sorcerous power and send my butchered corpse to its resurrection in the *mezcla*, the mixture-that-lives. It was the oldest way, after all, and the most certain. As for my return, that would depend on what else I was prepared to sacrifice, what else would be demanded of me.

Whatever the cost, it would be worth it if I could only find Juanita, and bring her home. As my vision faded, I thought I saw a city shining in the morning sun, a star gleaming neon on the side of a mountain. I think I reached out toward it, but I cannot really remember.

Lying there in the twilight, I could feel the bullet for a while: a hard, comforting lump underneath my skin, traveling slowly through my body before it passed too deep for me to reach it. When it had gone, I realized that the light was coming back, dispelling the dusk until the *mezcla* was filled with a hard brightness. The place in which I now lay was no different from the rest of the land I had seen. The dust was littered with white rocks: I picked one up, out of curiosity, and it lay lightly in my hand, with the dry heat of a bone. *You should take nothing from the mezcla, my grandmother had told me, and everything you will be offered will have a price.* Replacing the rock, I rose and went on my way, with one hand pressed to the new scar that ran across my ribs. I could taste ash on my tongue, the land smelled of smoke. As I came up over the lip of the ridge, I saw that I was standing by the side of a road.

It was little more than a track, marking its way through the dust. It was familiar: surely I had traveled this way before, out of Mexico. I stood indecisively all the same, wondering which direction to go, but my talisman already knew. I could feel the silver bullet traveling to the surface of my skin, straining at the right hand side, just beneath my ribs. *The city is over there, this way.* There was no pain, just insistence; obediently, I started walking. The wind rose up, sending the dirt in eddies through the still air, dust devils and loose brush rolling along the road like the spirits of those who had died on the highway. I thought of ghosts, riding down to Mexico: what happens to the migrants who don't come home? Have they found a better life, in the heaven to the north, or are they just lost? Are they here, wandering in nowhere? Is there any real difference?

I did not know if my daughter had entered the *mezcla* by the same means as myself, an immigrant into the land of the dead, or whether she had travelled by more conventional means. She'd had some kind of help, from Perez's ilk, from a coyote. I knew all the promises; I had heard them myself. *If you go to America, or into the mezcla, you will be twice as powerful as before when you return. Twice as rich, twice as beautiful.* I remembered the coyote's voice that first time, sounding so reasonable: *it is a small risk, for high stakes.* And every time they spoke, they lied. I thought my daughter would have known better; I underestimated the depth of her ambition. *Juanita*, I thought, but I could not cry in this bright dry air. The tears evaporated on my skin, turning into streaks of salt that blew away on the wind.

I don't know how long I was on the road. I recited the *descansos* as I walked, telling the rosary of my life, but it didn't seem real any more, as if all the pain and the love and the loss had happened to someone else, or had never happened at all. Then, shortly before the dusk rolled in across the desert, I could see something rising up from the horizon. I paused, squinting, but I couldn't quite make it out. It looked suddenly like a city: I could see apartment blocks and offices, but then the light hazed and there were only the indigo shadows of the mountains. Juanita would have headed for

the city, I thought; imagining that it held all the answers, the fulfillment of every promise. I'd heard her myself, talking about El Paso and what lay beyond it with a dream in her eyes. Every migrant thinks this: even though we know better, we still hold that last myth deep in our hearts.

As I hurried on through the twilight, I remembered the things that the men had said, returning from El Norte at the end of the citrus season and pouring from the bus into the town square of Tenochitlan.

"How was it?" you would ask, anxious for news, and they'd pause before they replied.

"America." A shrug. "Well. What is there to say?"

There was too much to tell. At first, they said, it seemed to be another world: a mirage, a dream come true, and then . . . they could not say anything more. Their voices trailed away into memories of America: a place of cold hearts, back-breaking labor among the fruit trees or the potato fields, battles with bureaucracy. Their stories did not change down the years, and flavored my own memories of El Paso. Without a visa, you had to remain invisible, melting back into the shadows whenever La Migra paid a visit, living in shacks and back rooms and always looking over your shoulder. And the people you passed on the street—what did they see? Only an orange picker or a maid, not even a name; just another illegal immigrant. Invisible, functional forms: barely flesh, hardly real. I'd known what it was like to be dead before I ever crossed into the *mezcla*.

Ahead, the mountains seemed to shiver into dust, drifting on the wind. The world itself was breaking down. It seemed to me that there were cars passing along the road: half seen, glimpsed from the corner of my eye. I saw pick-ups and Pontiacs, Chevrolets filled with families; their white faces staring unseeingly at me as they passed. And then one of these vehicles solidified as it pulled up out of the shadows: a limousine as white as the moon, with silver trim and smoky windows. The dust billowed up around its wheels as it slowed. The window hissed down and I could smell cold conditioned air and leather upholstery.

"Ma'am? Can I help you?"

The driver was young, one of my own people. I could see the carved mestizo face, more Indian than Spanish, beneath the chauffeur's peaked cap and the dark glasses. I could not see his eyes. I remembered what my grandmother had told me.

"No," I said. "No, I don't think so, thank you."

The driver inclined his head. From the back of the car came an impatient flutter of movement, and a bone-rattle old voice said, "Get on, man, get on. Some things won't wait, you hear me?"

The chauffeur nodded. He touched the wheel and the window began to wind up again, but just before the car sealed itself I stole a look into the back of the car. Two people were sitting there. I could not see the man who had spoken, but I knew the girl. I would have known her anywhere. Juanita's pale face stared straight ahead; the last thing I glimpsed before the window closed, resolutely not looking at me.

"Juanita!" I shouted, before I had time to think. The car pulled away; I banged my hand down on the hood but it made no sound. "It's me! Don't you know me?"

I should have remembered my revolutionary past— "*never reveal yourself to your enemy*"—but I was not that person any more. The limo was speeding up, tires grating on the uneven surface of the track. I saw myself reflected in its windows, but my face was old and a dark sky was above me. Juanita was gone. The shadows were rolling in from the desert, but far away on the horizon, I thought that I saw the city lights. It was too late. I could not go any further. I sat down abruptly by the side of the road, put my head on my knees, and closed my eyes.

3

When I opened them again, I found that the wound had opened too, like a flower in the sun, but this time it lay underneath my right-hand ribs. There was a woman crouched by my side, watching me. She seemed as old as the world; the soft flesh gone, her parchment skin stretched over a bone frame. Her eyes were yellow, the pupils slitted against the sunless light. She poked me in the ribs with a hand like a claw but I couldn't feel anything: she was prodding dead meat, after all.

"Leave me alone," I protested, but the words were swallowed by the desert air. The woman's hand moved efficiently down my side until it reached the wound. I tried to push her away, but I couldn't lift my arms. She pulled up the hem of my shirt to see, but the wound suddenly closed, as if defending itself, and there was only an old scar running in a white seam across my skin. The woman, undeterred, probed and pulled at the scar until it opened up again. Drawing my hand down, she forced my fingers into my own body, holding the wound open. Inside, it was hot and the flesh steamed in the dry air of the mezcla. She inserted two fingers, feeling for the bullet. I tried to pull away, but couldn't move. Her other hand rested on my chest with the weight of the world. If I still breathed, it would have crushed my lungs. She plucked the bullet out with a flourish, like a brujo's pretense of a cure. Before I could stop her, she popped the bloodslick pellet into her mouth and swallowed it. Her face seemed to shift and change; it was suddenly like looking into a mirror. The old flesh withered away, plumped out again under dark skin, a plait of black hair. Her face was my own. Then she smiled and was gone. I stared numbly down at my unmarked body.

"You've taken my talisman!" I cried, but it was too late.

Once the bullet had gone, I could feel the life begin to drain out of me at last, like the ghost of my blood. Only the thought of Juanita dragged me to my feet, to begin walking once more in the direction of the city. It seemed clearer today: those were not rocks, but buildings. I even thought I glimpsed a plane, coming in from the east, but then its cruciform shape changed into a white bird and it was gone. I blinked, trying to see more clearly. Already, with terror, I found that I was starting to forget things. I could no longer remember the name of my mother, who had died when I was a child. And the village where my father had come from, where was that? Slowly, my identity was beginning to fade, as though I had lost the

clues to who I might be. I felt myself moving like a puppet down the desert road, repeating my name to myself: *you are Lagrimas Ruiz, you come from Tenochtitlan, your daughter's name is Juanita*. But I was no longer sure whether it even meant anything. Only the name of the city remained: *El Paso*.

4

The city itself still continued to elude me. Sometimes it seemed very close, as though I looked down upon it from the hills, and could see streets and cars and shopping malls. Sometimes, too, it looked like a northern city; the tower blocks mirror-radiant in a sun I could not see, and the wide, clean streets that I remembered so well. I even thought that I knew some of the buildings: that tall one, right at the center, was a bank. A friend of mine had cleaned their offices for a week or two. At other times, it seemed as though it was somewhere in the third world: Guadalajara, perhaps, or Torréon, dusty and dirty and old. And sometimes—though less frequently now—it just seemed like outcrops of rock, and shadows. But whatever world it was, and even though my memories were being stripped down past the bone, immigration was something that I understood. I had seen Juanita in a rich man's car; I knew where to look. I kept on walking toward the city, repeating my daughter's name, and, at last, I reached its outskirts.

5

I don't remember much about that early period in the city. Much of the time, I was invisible. I spoke to people who did not seem to hear, but who walked by, brushing me aside. At other moments, I was the center of attention: the dead would cluster around me, and stare, and point. But none of this was new; I'd been here before. I understood how this world worked. And for the first time since Perez had fired the shot that had sent me into the *mezcla*, I felt almost at home.

The city had its own landscape: streets that shifted and changed from moment to moment, buildings that appeared one minute to be terrifyingly real, more solid than anything I had ever seen, the next becoming insubstantial and translucent. But they were always buildings, never rocks or outcrops of stone. It seemed that the city had decided to accept me, after all, even if it did not exactly welcome me back. I was like a cell in its body: something small and insignificant, it is true, but still not to be entirely rejected.

I slept under walkways, or crouched in the doorways of storefronts until the twilight lifted. And in what passed for day, I walked the alchemical streets, talking to the dead, and to others like myself, the barely living, searching for my daughter. Sometimes I even knew where I was: found

myself traversing familiar neighborhoods, and it was almost as though I were alive once more. Some of those I met worked in the factories and engine shops of the city, making things that I cannot now remember very clearly. Their machines seemed to be constructed of flesh: pulsing with blood and smelling like meat in the sun, but there were other machines, too, made of hard light and cold fire, embodying contradictions. The mezcra (if this is really where I now was) resembled my own world so closely: cars and computers and engines, yet the boundaries seemed blurred and confused. I took hope from the man-made quality of the things I saw, all the same. This was still not the natural world.

I even found my way out to the sterile orchards along the city's perimeter to talk to the migrant workers. The trees lay peacefully in the light, covered with a coating like ash, and nothing grew beneath them. One by one, the men stepped out from under the trees to stare at me with a kind of incurious patience, as if to see what I might do.

"Buenos dias," I said. "I'm looking for someone. I wonder if you've seen her?"

Silence. I went on, "I'm looking for my daughter. Her name is Juanita Ruiz. She's nineteen years old. This is what she looks like."

Reaching into the pocket of my shirt, I took out Juanita's photograph, glazed with the residue of my blood. They gazed at it blankly. Through the thin material of their shirts, I could see the scars of their missing hearts; signs on the landscape of their skin.

"Have you seen a car, then?" I described the white limousine. The men looked at one another and did not speak. Then they slowly turned and made their way back beneath the trees. I was left alone, blinking in the light. A breeze stirred the dry earth. Slowly, I walked back into the city.

Seven twilights had now passed since my arrival, and I was no closer to finding Juanita. I was also losing myself. Only fragments of words made sense to me now, as I split away from the languages that had been imposed upon me. The little English I had learned in America was the first to go, then Spanish, until the hard root words of Mayan were all that remained. Finally, they, too, were gone. There is a saying: *the soul is a speaker of words; the body, a doer of deeds*. My soul had forgotten its speech, and my body was a suit of skin without a heart.

At last, there came a time when I found that I could no longer remember my daughter's name, or even my own. I no longer had the words for things, but I did not mind. Language separates us from the world; without it, we are no longer able to differentiate ourselves, our self-awareness does not know how to describe itself. It was easier, in ways, without speech.

Wonderingly, I stared at the unnameable world, and, by degrees, I saw that the woman of the desert was squatting in front of me.

Tell me what you've learned she said, without words.

Nothing.

Then tell me your name.

I don't know it anymore.

Then you must find a new one.

How? I asked her.

You think you've come to find your daughter, the old woman said. *Like the grain spirit of the West, traveling down into the underworld to bring her back. You think this is that sort of story. But what kind of story is really being dreamed here?*

—and then she told me a story, my own story, related back to myself so that it became real again: the story of a young woman raised in the poverty of the Yucatan mountains, educated by missionaries, who passed through Marxism and liberation theology and the emergent nationalism of the Aztlan movement of the early twenty-first century; who escaped to El Norte and was deported, who married and had a child and lost her again. And, as she spoke, I saw that she was indeed myself; perhaps my spirit, or the thing that lives at the core of a being.

You used to believe in a better world the old woman said. *What do you believe in now?* and the tears rose up in my throat and choked me, because I did not know. Marxism was long gone, my comrades were dead, and so was God, and I had not known what to believe in for a long time now.

You have not crossed the border my self said. *The borders have crossed you.*

—and then she named me to myself. Mestiza: Indian and Spanish, colonizer and colonized, alienated and dispossessed. People try to define their own boundaries of who they are, outlining their own borders, but these are displaced by the categories and distinctions that others impose upon us, covering us with layers of concepts that brand and constrain. *Tribal consciousness* my self said. *Your myths are where you are to be found.*

—and I nodded, for I had learned from my own life that tribal consciousness is not static, reactionary, or backward-looking. Tribal consciousness is *revolutionary* consciousness: mutable and fluid and transforming. It emerges in response to extreme conditions, it can explain devastating change. It contains dualities and contradictions. It is *la conciencia de la mezcla*: the consciousness of the borderlands.

The woman who was my self took my hand and pressed something hard and cold into it. When I glanced down, I saw the small cylinder of the bullet that had brought me to the *mezcla*. I did not see her go. I remained by the side of the road, and began to dream the end of my story.

From the border crossroads that is my *mezcla* self, two endings can spring. The first version tells of how I rise and begin to walk to the heart of the city, how the dead, seeing me at last, move aside to let me pass, and how I come at last to the matrix on which the *mezcla* is founded, the junction between death and life. Here, the Lord of the World is Tezcatlipoca, Smoking Mirror, the black and burning god of the north. Through a glass, darkly, I can see the sacrifice of my child on the altar steps to satisfy the bloodthirsty desires of El Norte, that heartless world, only to rise again with the corn and the spring.

But there is another possibility, too, in which the *mezcla* collapses into a newer myth. In this version of the story, I get up from my place on the sidewalk, glance again at the address that I bribed out of Juanita's friends this morning, and because I have no more money for bus rides, I

walk to the Hyatt Intercontinental in downtown El Paso. Ignoring the protests of the reception staff, I take the lift up to the cloudy heights of the hotel and bang on the door of room 456. Juanita, wearing a red dress that is too tight and too short, opens the door and bursts into tears. I don't look at the man behind her, with his dark glasses and sharp suit; I will not listen to what he says. Instead, I say:

"Come on. You're coming back to Tenochitlan with me. We're going home."—and I grasp her by the wrist and lead her out of one world and into another.

But then there is always the question of whether she will stay, whether Tenochitlan has anything to offer her any more. Perhaps she'll return to America one day; perhaps she'll stay there in El Paso. Maybe Persephone chose to eat those pomegranate seeds.

Juanita, like Persephone, like myself: both lost and saved. And we have joined the citizens of the mezcla, we who have become the borders, working to unravel the world and begin, again. ○

OUR THE FIRST HUNDRED DAYS

Paints the White House gunmetal gray.

Appoints R2-D2 Secretary of State.

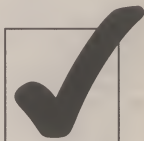
Makes it a Federal Offense
to kick a vending machine.

Launches a campaign to change
Old Glory from stars and stripes
to microchips and wires.

Declares WD-40 a National Treasure.

Names a computer program
United States Poet Laureate.

Forces Congress to sit bolt upright.



—Bruce Boston

DARK OF THE SUN

William Barton

William Barton tells us that “this tale is an interquel, if you will, to ‘Moments of Intertia’ (*Asimov’s*, April/May 2004). On page twenty-six of the first story, Scott Faraday says, ‘The spacesuits we’d stolen from dead Philadelphia were astonishingly heavy . . .’ and this is how things went down.” “Dark of the Sun” takes both readers who are familiar with the original tale and those who are new to the story on a fast-paced and breathtaking adventure.

A word of warning: there are brief scenes in the following tale that may be disturbing to some readers.

On the day it hit a sustained minus-seventy, there was a magnitude nine earthquake in southern California, and San Francisco burned to the ground. A hundred thousand people died in minutes, twice that number perishing in the flames that followed. Then, over the next twenty-four hours, a million more froze to death. How they got the rest of the survivors to Los Angeles, I don’t know.

What can I tell you about all of it now? How Paulie, nothing better to do with his life, surfed the net ’til he discovered the Cone of Annihilation, an expanding wave of dimmed-out stars about to darken the sun? Or maybe how I embezzled ten million bucks, just so the two of us could survive on an Earth as cold as midnight on Mars? Hell, all those details are irrelevant now.

Plenty of coverage on TV, nothing *but* coverage, commentators in their glory now, as never before, and the pictures of the fire were wondrous to behold, yellow flames spiraling into the permanent night, real candle-in-the-wind stuff, the four of us glued to the TV for another little while.

Does *this* make it more real, Paulie?

Anyway, the government concealed the truth, talking about a black cloud that’d come and go, just a few months of night and cold, ’til it was

too late for anyone to do anything about it. Anyone who wasn't among the men who count, anyway.

Poor old Paulie. There was something subdued about him now. Dark circles under his eyes. But he and Julia sat together on the couch, holding hands at least. That seemed to bother Connie, but I don't know what, if anything, they talked about, when we weren't around.

As it turned out, we'd done the math wrong, even when we had the real numbers Paulie'd gotten from scientists on the net, well before national security clamped down tight. Cold as Mars? Hell. They'd called it the Cone of Annihilation for a reason. Cold as the Interstellar deep, you see, cold as a pail of air.

And we'd need everything, not just a geothermally heated underground shelter. Everything you could possibly imagine, in as short a time as possible. Something like a bombshelter, but as airtight as a spaceship. Which led to the belated realization we'd need something like spacesuits too. . . .

It was cold as hell outside as Paul and I walked around back to where the Antonov's hangar was covered in a hump of crispy snow. The runway we'd had bulldozed only a few months back was blocked, not just with snowdrifts, but fallen trees that'd blown onto it during the worst of the snowcanes.

Standing there, feeling too exhausted, I suppose, to tackle the job of shoveling our way into the hangar just yet, Paul blew out a cloud of condensate. "You think we can clear that with the Cat?"

I shook my head. "Maybe if we could rig some kind of plow blade. But I doubt it."

"What then? Rig chains and come-a-longs? Drag them out of the way with Ron's jeep, one by one?"

Ron. Ron. Ron. Never give up, do you? I said, "Hell, Alton Construction's just three miles down the highway. We can go rent a couple of bulldozers or something."

"They're parked outside. Probably won't start."

"No kidding. Alton's probably closed for the winter anyway." Winter. Hah.

"So?"

"Sew buttons. Look, we can drive the halftrack over, knock down the fence and tow a dozer or two back here."

"What good'll that do? They still won't start. The diesel in the engines will be solid."

"You're stupid, Paulie."

"Yeah? What's your solution?"

"Park 'em in the garage and circulate hot water through the cooling jackets overnight. Charge up the batteries and they'll start in the morning."

"Oh."

Long silence. Then he said, "You know, if we had bulldozers, maybe we could add some additional material to the birm."

"You think that'll add to our margin? I thought we had enough insulation already."

"I wasn't thinking about that; I was thinking about the rainout. *Ero-*

sion, you know? I keep trying to figure out how much of the ground is going to wash away when the nitrogen comes down. I can't do it. But I'm . . . I don't know. Worried, I guess."

You're *worried*, Paulie? Jesus. I started to shiver, unable to picture liquid nitrogen rain. What will it be, miles of ice, crushing us flat? "What if it doesn't rain, Paulie? What if the vapor turns to ice in the sky and deposits as frost on the ground? Nice and gentle-like."

He snorted. Derision and contempt. "That's just carbon dioxide, Scott. The rest? You're in denial." Good old shrinktron words.

I said, "Well, the shelter will only keep us alive for a little while anyway, Paul. You know that." Dead is as good as dead. Whatever the hell that means. Another blast of breathy fog came out of his mask, fogging his goggles, so that he had to scrape them off, looking for all the world like he was rubbing away tears. "Yeah. Well. I thought so too, but . . . now that I have . . . now that Julia's . . ." he stopped, seeming to collect himself. Then he said, "Maybe if we have enough birm, the main redoubt will survive. I think there's enough sealant on the concrete that it'll hold air pressure. And there sure as hell will be enough air lying around on the ground! We can scoop it up in buckets, as needed."

Pails, Paulie. Pails. I said, "The two of you seem . . . reconciled?"

He sighed again, scraped again. "She . . . seemed to enjoy herself last night, Scott. And then . . . it's like she's . . ."

"That ole black magic, Paulie?"

"Jackass." No heat in his voice, just habit.

I said, "Let's go get a couple of shovels, Paulie. The hangar door's under here somewhere."

Even with the two bulldozers, it took us almost a week to get the runway cleared, what with Paul and Julia putting in so much extra sack time, then the time it took to teach Paul how to operate a dozer. First time out, he almost ran over the jeep.

When I tried to talk to Connie about this Paul and Julia business, she seemed evasive, angry about something. "Julia's a damned fool," she said. Very grim.

"Why? Because she's settled down in Paul's bed? What's so foolish about that?" She'd just looked at me, eyes full of something, I don't know what. Didn't seem to affect anything else between us, though, and I tried to stop thinking about Ron and his place in her, um, heart. That's it. Heart.

Right.

A week then, while we played with our bulldozers and tried to explain the rainout and the little Siberian airplane, and just *why* we needed to fly to Philadelphia, where NASA'd relocated the spacesuit factory after the mysterious big order two years back. Not so mysterious *now*, huh guys?

Spacesuits? Connie had said, looking incredulous. Why spacesuits? Will it really get that cold?

Really, Paul managed to say. Once the atmosphere rains out, there won't be any more atmosphere.

Huh?

He'd shrugged, deeming it hopeless.

Maybe Connie got it. Hard to tell. Lawyers aren't stupid. But they're not too *scientific*, either. Air is air. And it's invisible. Wave your hand. Feel it? Well, that's just *wind*, isn't it?

I once tried to explain how TVs work to my mom, Dad laughing like hell as he listened. Connie has an undergraduate degree in English Lit., then law school. Julia was a music major.

As for going to Philly, well, that's where the spacesuit factory is.

Why couldn't you just mail order them?

Because they cost forty million dollars apiece, and they're not for sale anyway.

Connie got her spooky lawyer look then, and said, Stealing? What if you get caught? I'd pulled my cell phone out of my pocket and grinned, If they let me have my constitutional rights, I'll give you a call. Maybe you can make bail for us. There's still some money in the accounts.

All Paulie said as we got ready to go was, "Look after Paprika for me, will you, Julia?"

Now we were flying low over the snow, white hillocks lit up by the landing and takeoff lights mounted on the retractable gear. Paul hit the switch and they went out, fine Russian electromechanicals winding the skidwheels up into their belly pods. There was a thump as the pod doors shut.

"There," he said. "A lot smoother now." He banked sharply, dim ground angling under us, slowly getting farther away as we passed over the empty, brightly lit parking lot of Red Sulfur Mills, then leveling off, heading north.

"That takeoff was scary." I was thinking about the checkout girl in the Harris Teeter, wondering if she was still coming to work. It'd been minus-seventy-three this morning. Funny, I keep expecting it to get warmer during the day.

"I'm out of practice."

"Yeah. Hey look," I pointed out the window. "Power's out all over the west side of town!"

The plane wobbled heavily when he tried to look. "Damn!" He gripped the wheel hard and we steadied. "Guess I better pay attention to the panel. These are more or less IFR conditions." A quick glance my way. "Instrument Flight Rules."

"I know what IFR means, doofus."

"Yeah, well. I wish the hell you'd taken flying lessons too. What if something happens to me while we're in Philly?"

"Then I'll just have to wing it, Paulie." Wing it. Get it, Paulie? Nyuk-nyuk . . .

"But you don't know what it's *like*! And I know how scared you get."

Do you, Paulie? I said, "It'll take about four hours for us to get to Philly, Paul. Maybe this would be a good time for you to start teaching me?" I pointed at the little round circle of an obvious radar screen, lit up pale green, bright sweep hand going round and round, like something from an old movie. Don't the Russians have digital yet? I tapped it, pointing to a moving green dot. "What's this?"

He looked, jumped, the plane wallowing again, and said, "Jesus!" He

twisted, squinting out into the darkness. When I looked, I could see a moving bright dot off to the northwest. Moving fast.

"Is that another plane?"

"Yeah."

"Airliner?"

He shook his head. "I dunno. I think it's a fighter."

"Not coming this way." The light got dimmer as I watched, fading away to nothing after a while. Imagine that. Jet fighter swooping down on us like something from a movie. What the hell? Machine guns? No, this isn't 1950. Missiles. Explosions. Maybe I'd be flung out into the cold and dark, falling and falling.

Or maybe there'd be a better movie. Maybe they'd just wing us, and heroic Paulie would bring us down in a controlled crash, plane thumping and bumping to a stop in the snow, like in *Lost Horizon*. I looked at the air speed indicator, then at my watch. We'd already come almost a hundred miles.

Well, then, there's another movie for you. The one about the long walk back in the snow. Minus-seventy-three. And getting colder all the time.

Paulie said, "I can't see a God-damned thing. I guess I thought the highway lights would still be up. A few cars . . ." He reached out and flipped a switch, and a little gray LCD screen in the middle of the panel lit up, dimly backlit. White snow hills, under a black horizon. There were smudgy bright spots, here and there, some of them with flickery twists wriggling above them.

"What . . ."

He grinned. "FLIR. Forward Looking Infrared." He patted the console and said, "This is a *very* nice little plane."

On the screen, I could see the bright smudges were houses, the twists above them smoke from their chimneys. People, I thought, are still alive.

Outside the window, it was pitch black now, only the stars showing the difference between the sky and the ground. Every now and again, we'd see a blob of light going by underneath us, some house generating its own power, and once, following I-95 north toward DC, there was a truck driving slowly along.

He said, "Well, we're over the road I guess. Maybe I can use the autopilot for a little while." He reached out and flipped a switch somewhere to the left of the wheel. Suddenly, the plane was rock-steady.

We had to steer well clear of DC, controlled airspace and all that, plane wobbling again as Paul took control, but it didn't look like anything was on fire. There were floodlights on the National Mall, lighting up the Capitol Dome, lighting up the Washington Monument clean and white, just like the snow. Dulles Airport was shut, but Reagan was still open, loud voices blaring from our cabin radio speakers, telling us to stay the hell away. Military and scheduled commercial flights only. No civil aviation.

There were still plenty of lights atwinkle outside the Beltway, suburbs still alive, people snug in their living rooms watching the world die on TV, just like us. Pretty chilly, huh guys, even if you've got oil and forced air? Betcha can't hardly wait for November!

The Baltimore-Washington Parkway was still lit up too, by streetlamps

and the headlights of vehicles, but when Paulie brought her down low, making sure we were well above the trees and wires, I could see it was just humvees and those big green Army trucks, most of them heading south toward DC.

Something funny about the light coming over the horizon. Jesus, the north should be all lit up, white light from Baltimore, those searchlights out over the harbor, flooding the sky, blotting out the stars. Instead, there was a rim of dim orange on the horizon, visibly waxing and waning.

Paulie pulled back on the wheel a little bit, letting the plane slowly rise away from the road, both of us keeping our eyes fixed on the dull orange light. I started to feel sick after a while, knowing what was what, well before Paulie, subdued, said, "I think Baltimore's on fire." When we got close enough, you could see the flames rising, angry red and orange, mixed with boiling backlit smoke, the air growing increasingly turbulent, until Paulie had to turn away, turning back to follow the Baltimore Beltway around the city.

Below us, you could see there were cars on the roads, cars leaving town, and lines of black dots that had to be people on foot. When we passed over the 640/95 interchange, I saw there was a roadblock, two big Army trucks blocking the ramps, and some parked humvees. Every now and again, bits of white light would glitter in the dark, and there were lots of black dots in the snow, dots maybe motionless, hard to tell from up here.

Paulie wasn't looking down any more, face expressionless, keeping his eyes on his instruments, or out at the contrast-black sky.

I said, "None of this is on TV, Paulie."

After a while, he said, "No."

"Keep everyone in the dark. Interdict the refugees as long as possible. Keep things quiet. Why the hell can't they tell the truth now? Give people time to *prepare*."

There was a long silence, burning Baltimore passing away to our right as we circled around and picked up the highway again north of town. Funny. We should be able to see Philly from here. Surely . . .

Suddenly, Paul said, "I can't imagine what I'd do, if it happened this way to me. All alone, freezing cold in my house. No Julia. Or maybe just you, hanging around and calling me an asshole to the bitter end. What the hell could we have done to *prepare*, Scott?"

I shrugged. "If we thought the Sun was coming back in only three more weeks? Hang on, that's all."

"And if they told the truth? If we knew it was only an awful death, just a little ways down the road?"

"I dunno. What're we doing *now*?"

"Trying to make it."

"You know we won't, Paulie."

"I don't want to believe that. Not now."

Doofus. I said, "Well, hell, Paulie. Maybe you'd be living in north Durham, with me. Maybe we'd be making expeditions out into the cold and dark with our fine new guns. Maybe we'd be kidnapping lovely young Negresses from the slums, taking them home and, um, cooking them for our supper. Whaddaya think, Paulie?"

I could hear him snicker, amused despite himself. "You always did like that bit from *Chessmen*, where the kaldanes are feasting on a female rykor, and Gahan thinks it's a girl. Sick. You're a sick bastard and you always were."

Philly wasn't on fire, it turned out, merely dark. All the way dark. No building lights. No streetlights. No cars. No nothing. On FLIR, the buildings were a jumble, impossible to interpret as we circled around.

I said, "Be nice if this thing had a spotlight."

"Yeah. I . . . Oh. Wait." He reached out and flipped a switch. The gear whined back out of their pods and the landing lights came on as the plane shuddered with increased turbulence. "There."

I peered down at the pool of radiance moving below us, looking at black buildings and silent white city streets. They'd kept it plowed, I guess, right to that same bitter end, though snow was drifting in the corners now. Lots of cars parked by the curbs, every now and again one sitting in the middle of the street. One obvious intersection wreck, two big SUVs piled into one another, T-boning. Probably after the lights went out for good.

"What you suppose happened here?"

He shrugged. "I guess the power went out."

"No kidding, Sherlock. Okay, Paulie. What do we do now?"

Long silence, Paulie flying as low as he dared, looking out his side window. "I dunno. If I could figure out where we are . . ."

"Well, what'd you think we were going to do when we *got* here? Land at the airport and take a cab?"

Silence. Then, "I guess so."

"Great. Just great, Paulie. Gimme the map." The paper practically filled the front of the cockpit when I unfolded it, blocking our view, Paulie batting it out of his way, angry and sullen. "Look. That's got to be the Schuylkill River down there, right? So we have to be somewhere along here, right? Flying this way?" Moving my finger along the map.

He muttered, "If you say so."

"What, Paulie? If you don't make any decisions, when we crash and burn you can tell me it wasn't *your* fault?"

Silence.

"Okay. Jesus. Look, the factory's right here on the map. See? We even circled it, so we'd know where to go! So it's back *that* way," I gesticulated toward the rear left cabin window, "about four miles from where we are now. If we just get in the general neighborhood, we can fly around until we *see* it!"

"Then what?" Voice very tight, like he was holding back an attack of diarrhea or something.

"Jesus, Paulie. This is a pretty little airplane. Can't you land in the street?"

Silence.

"Paulie?"

"No. I'm too scared."

"Too late, Paulie. We're here. It's do or die."

When he looked over at me, his eyes seemed huge and dark, big black holes in the palest white face I'd ever seen.

I said, "Come on, Paulie. Let's go. Turn this plane the hell around."

The building turned out to be easy enough to find, a big thing like a warehouse in the middle of a big suburban industrial park, embedded in a mess of similar buildings, all of them surrounded by big, dark parking lots.

"See, Paulie? No problem. Set her down anywhere. Just don't hit those cars." He circled back again, making another pass over the building, peering down into the bright circle of our lights.

"Come on, Paulie."

He looked at me. "There are telephone wires. If I hit them, we'll be killed."

"Oh, come on, Paulie! The power's off. They'll just break, won't they?"

He gave me a long look as we turned in the dark, heading back again. "No they won't. And if we live through the crash, we'll be stuck here." Long silence as the lot approached again, then, "Asshole."

"That's the spirit, Paulie. Hey, look, we're here again. Land the plane, Paulie." I put my hands over my face and said, "Lemme know when we're down. I can't look." Grin. Big grin. See Paulie? I ain't . . .

He made some strangled sound, not quite words, and I felt the plane wing over and drop suddenly, then level out, engine roaring, making my gut feel like it was turning to water. I snatched my hands away, looking popeyed out the window.

Jesus!

Oh, Christ!

Not me! Not *now*!

We went right between two concrete telephone poles, skimming between a layer of thick black wires and a chain link fence topped with a roll of razor wire, plane yawing back and forth, first one wing forward, then the other.

I think I screamed. Maybe not. Paulie didn't look.

We hit the ground hard, making a lot of noise, a clatter like crushing trash cans, bounced high, engine roaring, and for the first time I became aware of the prop windmilling on the nose.

Maybe I screamed again as I saw more telephone wire, passing *underneath* this time. I said, "Paulie? Paulie!"

We hit again and he did something with his feet, like he was trying to stand on tippy-toe or something, then the plane bucked, tail rising up, so the ground was in front of us. He shouted, "Oh, Christ! Don't hit the prop on the ground!"

We went up in the air again, more roaring noises, and I thought the plane was going to spin like a Frisbee. *Bang*. Down hard, then we were rolling, slewing back and forth, skidding sideways. Car. *Car*! Well, maybe a pickup truck? Passing just under the left wing.

And, quite suddenly, we were stopped, engine turning over, propeller spinning. Paulie reached out and flipped a switch. Silence. Propeller spinning to a stop.

Jesus. Maybe I had a heart attack. Maybe I'm dead.

Paulie, bright and chipper, said, "Okay, Scott. You can look now."

* * *

Even bundled up, flashlights in our gloved hands, rifles tucked under our arms, it was intolerably cold outside after the warmth of the Antonov's cabin. The wind was like razors, cutting right through the balaklava's knit, and it felt like it was a lot colder here than in Virginia. The wind . . . no, supposedly below minus-seventy it doesn't matter anymore.

There were little crystals of snow blowing sideways through our flashlight beams, glittering like the sparkly effect of a TV starship's transporter.

Paul said, "What'll it be like when it's *twice* this cold?"

One-forty below? Worse than the worst of Siberia. Maybe a little colder than the dead of Antarctic winter. So cold if we took off our goggles our eyeballs would freeze. "Forty degrees warmer than midnight on Mars. That's what."

He turned and looked at me, a faceless goblin in parka, goggles and mask. "I keep forgetting! I just keep forgetting. Colder. Then colder still."

As we walked in under the entry colonnade, up to the big glass doors, I said, "Hey, Paulie, remember when we were working on the *Red Iris* stories?" Twenty years ago, Paulie? How'd that happen? "Remember how you thought frozen gases would be fluffy and insubstantial?" I remember the big fights, Paulie. I remember how you'd given me that haughty look: They're *gases*, Scott, you'd said, with your very best sneer.

Yeah? So's steel if you get it hot enough.

He just looked at me. Nothing. Maybe he doesn't remember anymore. Maybe that's how it happened. He forgets. I remember. And so nothing I say about the past seems real, the subject of our boring old fights just one more jealous fantasy I harbor like a grudge, while innocent old Paulie sails on, serene and oh-so-superior.

He reached out, fumbling his flashlight, and tugged on the door handle. "Locked."

I said, "Shoot it! With a gun! That's what the *bullets* are for!"

A long, goggly look. Finally: "Oh. *Bat Guano*. Right?"

"Correct-a-mun—"

He leveled his SKS and pulled the trigger, echoes hammering under the overhang, flashes lighting up the dark foyer, while I jumped back, shouting wordlessly, cowering away from an expected shower of glass.

Smoke curled from the barrel of his gun and the window glass was punctured by a dozen neat little holes. "Well," he said, "that was handy."

Mouth drier now than the cold had made it, I said, "Let's stand back a few yards and empty a few clips into the lock."

It only took a clip from each of us, ricochets flashing, sparks flying, before the deadbolt sprang from its mount and flew back into the room. That let the two spring-loaded lock rods, one above, one below, drop out of their receptacles, and the door sprang wide, traveled to the end of its hinges, and latched open, just like it was supposed to.

I said, "Open sesame."

You could still hear faint echoes of our gunfire coming back from different parts of town. Anybody out there to hear it? Christ. We walked through the door, flashlights reflecting eerily off white walls. Nobody home. No dead receptionist at the desk for us to admire.

Paul said, "You ever wonder what the Arabic original of that could've been?"

We walked around the desk, toward the rear wall, where the building directory was on a big bronze plaque. I said, "Sesame? Geez, I never thought about it."

He said, "Okay." Flashlight roving up and down the mess of words. "I guess the first thing we want to check out is . . ."

Somebody's gloved hand came over my shoulder, holding a big, serrated knife at least ten inches long, while another hand grabbed my rifle and pulled it out from under my arm. I dropped the flashlight, beam swinging up as it bounced on the floor, Paulie's light swinging wide. Another hand pulled down my parka, pull-tie suddenly strangling me, goggles ripping off along with the balaklava.

Freezing cold. Not so cold as outside.

Suddenly, I was sitting on the floor, dizzy as hell, looking up at a man with a knife in one hand. His other hand was unholstering an automatic of some kind, nine millimeter maybe, swinging it around and pointing it at my face. There were a bunch more somebodies behind him in the foyer, some in camo, some in alpine white, all of them with guns.

The man with the pistol and knife said, "So. Just who do you think you are, shooting up government property?"

Sprawled on the floor beside me, Paulie said, "B'beah, b'beah . . ."

Pistol-knife snickered, taking the gun from between my eyes, swinging it down and dropping it back in its holster. "Okay, boys. On your feet. Let's go."

They took us back through the building, flashlit shadows moving through cold, dark, empty halls, and locked us in a room, wearing our coats, minus our guns and bullets, masks and goggles, flashlights gleaming. Even that, only as an afterthought, the knife-wielder, whose jacket said *Geligmann* over the left breast pocket, grinning and tossing them on the table. "In case you boys 'fraid o' de bogeyman."

The door had a key-only deadbolt above the usual office snap lock, and the windowless room's furniture was folding chairs, most of them folded and stacked against one wall.

Paulie said, "It's cold. I wish they'd picked up our masks at least."

"Paul, these guys are probably going to shoot us, once they figure out who we are." Who the hell *are* we?

Nobody.

His eyes were ghoulish shadows, face lit from underneath. "Who do you suppose . . ."

"Probably just some Army people. Jesus! We should've realized the government would need spacesuits too! I'm surprised they're not already long gone." I imagined us showing up here at the risk of life and limb, as they say, only to find the place cleaned out. That would've been funny enough.

Paulie said, "Maybe they almost forgot, just like us. What are you smiling about?"

"Nothing."

There was a key in the lock, deadbolt sliding back with a squeak. Graphite lubricant's probably clotted from the cold. The door opened and admitted a tallish man in a heavy green overcoat with a big fur-trimmed parka. Familiar looking outfit. National Geographic or something. He smiled, white teeth in a pale, narrow face. "Pull up a chair, boys." Took one himself in a thickly gloved hand, unfolding it with a clatter and plopping down.

I said, "It's too cold. We're only wearing jeans."

"Tsk, tsks." He smiled again and shook his head. "Not so well prepared for a couple of boys with the foresight to own a Siberian Blizzard Rescue surplus Antonov!"

Paulie said, "Oh, damn," sounding a little gut-punched.

"What, you didn't think we'd *notice*? That was a hell of a landing you boys made!" He suddenly held out a hand. "Hey, my name's Jergens. I'm with NASA?" Rising tone, as if he wondered whether we might not know the acronym.

I took it in my own. "Faraday. This is Gardner," I jerked my head at Paulie and grimaced. "The pilot." Paulie the Pilot? Sounds like a cartoon character.

Jergens said, "You've got some balls on ya, Mr. Gardner! Hell, I've got over seven-thousand hours in light planes *and* a bit of Antarctic time in. I wouldn't've tried something like that for love or money! How much time on your ticket hotshot?"

Paul seemed embarrassed. "Um. Maybe fifty hours. I dunno."

Jergens smiled, tight lipped. "Well. That probably explains it. Be real interesting to see how you get it back in the air."

Paulie's face tightened, maybe thinking about it, but I felt something in my chest soar free. "Does, uh . . . does that mean you're letting us go?"

He frowned, looked at me again. "Well, that depends. Suppose you tell me why you're here? I mean, the sun's coming back out in only eighteen more days. The Air Force has been tracking you on radar ever since you were noticed flying by National . . ."

Paulie muttered, "Reagan."

Jergens glanced at him. "What? Oh." Grimaced again, looking back at my face. "Look, the only reason you could possibly have for breaking into this building is to steal spacesuits. I want to know *why* anyone would come from wherever the hell you set out, somewhere south of DC I guess, when this will all be over on a couple of weeks or so."

I swallowed. "Ah. I'm not sure where to begin."

He rolled his eyes. "Is there a beginning?"

I said, "Well. Um. For starters, we know the sun's not coming back."

He sat back in his chair, hands braced on knees, eyes narrow. "Who the hell are you? And this better be good. Captain Geligmann's kind of an asshole. He wants to shoot you two and leave you right here in this room."

I said, "Well. I, uh, I'm sort of a, uh," I choked, gagged slightly, went on, "I'm sort of a computer programmer. I, um, penetrated your firewalls last year. Via the server at the Russians' Crimean astrophysical . . ." His eyes seemed to pop from his head, making me stop, shivering, wondering if he'd summon the shootist. Behind me, Paulie had shrunk back, disap-

pearing from my peripheral vision. I heard a little clatter as he backed into the stacked-up chairs by the wall.

Jergens glanced at him, then looked at me. Very softly: "Go on."

"We found out what was going to happen about a year ago. When . . . when Dr. Shovatsky was murdered. . . ." Jergens's eyes popped again. "We decided to keep our mouths shut and . . . I dunno. We came up with a survival plan and . . . implemented it."

He said, "Implemented. You implemented a plan to survive the rest of your lives at temperatures down near absolute zero?"

"Sort of."

He shook his head, looking away, into the shadows. "Sort of. Jesus." Looked back at me. "Where'd you get the money for something like that?"

I choked again. "Well, I, uh, wrote a little program that sort of . . . embezzled it."

"Embezzled. How much?"

"Um. Ten million dollars."

He rubbed his chin. "That's not really enough, is it? The National Redoubt cost more than a trillion."

I felt my heart leap. *National Redoubt*? Even our turn of phrase. I shook my head. "We, we . . ." I gritted my teeth, chopping off a stutter. "We didn't know how bad it was going to be, at first. But we've got a zero-pressure armored capsule that can probably survive the rainout. If our main shelter's birm makes it through, then . . ."

He shook his head. "Odds are, the Earth will be scoured down to bedrock. We're not sure what will happen to the oceans."

I said, "How many people are in the . . . National Redoubt?"

A long questioning look. "Eighteen thousand."

Paulie said, "That's all?"

Jergens said, "Look, I'm sorry, but if you're not on the *List* . . ."

I said, "We weren't asking."

He said, "Yeah. Um. How many spacesuits did you need?"

I said, "Four. A standard medium," I glanced at Paulie, "a large, and two smalls. The smalls need to have female plumbing."

Jergens said, "Ah, so."

Paulie said, "So you'll let us go?"

Jergens slowly nodded, braced his hands on his knees and stood up. "Yeah. Come on. I'll help you pick out the suits. We've got 'em all boxed up by the loading dock. You'll need one of those adjuster/repair tool kits. And a supply of the fittings required for recharging the portable life support system backpacks." He grinned suddenly. "Bet you guys didn't even know you needed all that stuff!"

I shook my head. "Lucky for us . . ."

"Yeah, lucky-lucky. All of us are so God-damned lucky!" Then he laughed. "Hey, we've even got enough guys here we can drag your little plane out to the highway, so Superboy here can take off without hitting anything!"

We had a rough time getting aloft, the Antonov bumping and jerking, yawing and wallowing, as we ran down the southbound lane of the highway, smacking low drifts, thumping back down, like something from an

old low comedy, engine roaring and buzzing each time we left the ground. By the light of the instruments, I could see Paulie's eyes aglimmer, fixed out the window at barely visible landscape.

Dark under the stars.

Darker than you think.

And, high overhead, the black circle of the Cone.

Jesus. Almost noon!

We passed under a set of power lines and Paulie suddenly pulled back on the yoke with one hand, fiddling something overhead with the other, twisting in his seat, seeming to strain. A little grunt, at least. We flew up, passing over the next set of wires, wires flashing for just a moment in our landing lights, then the plane banked, turning hard right.

We passed over the industrial park and I could see dark figures on the ground; couldn't tell if any were waving. They had the loading dock door open still, big semi backed up to the platform, people carrying boxes two-by-two, putting them in the back, making me conscious of our own load, of the way it'd shifted, boxes completely filling the passenger cabin, bumping and clinking together as Paulie twisted us through the sky.

We leveled off, still climbing, turning away from cold and dark Philadelphia, heading for a greater darkness beyond, black horizon cutting off the stars, far, far away.

Though it was warm in the plane now, I shivered, still feeling the way the cold had seeped into me. Or maybe I was just afraid.

Some time today, that last vestige of doubt leached away.

This is it.

Paulie sat back, sighing, relaxing at the controls. West by southwest, helmsman! Aye-aye, Cap'n Bolitho! Steady as she goes! Jergens had given us a compass heading, numbers I guess Paulie understood, though they meant nothing to me. There he'd been, standing in the windy cold by our plane, freshly loaded with almost a quarter-billion dollars' worth of government hardware, plane towed by forklift to the highway, facing into the wind, shaking our hands.

Once you reach Hagerstown, he'd said, you'll be able to pick up Eighty-One and follow it south down the Shenandoah Valley, all the way to Red Sulfur Springs. Good luck, boys.

Paulie reached up and snapped on the cabin light, gave his instruments the once-over, then activated the autopilot and sat back, relaxed for a minute, shut his eyes, seemed to shiver, stopped, opened them again and looked at me.

"You okay, Paulie?"

He nodded. "I just didn't think it'd be this scary, you know?"

My turn to nod. I looked out the window, down at the missing landscape, suddenly wishing I'd see some lights. Just one person, one family, up here in the mountains of southern Pee-ay, somebody with a generator, a fireplace, plenty of wood or oil or something, able to live on, for just a little while longer, as it got . . . colder.

Another flash of Jergens, leading us to the storeroom, where they had the boxed-up suits sorted by size and type, ready for shipment. I remember my surprise when I saw how many there were. Jergens shrugging,

telling us it was some pork-barrel thing. NASA needed a couple of dozen suits for the International Space Station, maybe another dozen spares. By the time the honorable delegations from Pennsylvania and New Jersey were through, the contract had been for a hundred. Then the production line, which had been moved from Delaware to Philly as part of the pork-barrel deal, was still up when the Cone of Annihilation came to stay, and so . . . a shug, and he'd said, Anyway, that was the story in the papers.

The suits, he'd said, were really not all that well-rated for cold. You remember all the trouble there'd been on the Shuttle EVAs, where astronauts servicing the Hubble Space Telescope had their hands get freezing cold, when they worked over the night side of Earth? Well, there'd been a few improvements, electrified gloves and stuff, but stay-time was still limited.

That long, long look at me. Then he'd said, You know, Faraday, after the rainout, your ability to stay outside in these things will get less over time?

And then Paul had said, It'll just keep on getting colder, won't it?

Jergens had grinned, lines deepening on his face, looking like an affable middle-aged actor in some fine, manly role. Eastwood. Bruce Willis. One of those. And he'd said, For a while. Then it'll be so cold, there won't be any colder to get. In the bubble-universe of the Antonov's nice, warm cabin, Paulie said, "Why d'you suppose he gave them to us?"

I shrugged, twisting and looking over my shoulder at the packed boxes. "I dunno. It . . . Hell, it almost seems like he just plain *liked* us."

Paulie grinned, "Hey, that's a first!"

"Yeah. Even *we* don't like us."

He said, "You know, with a full load of fuel, just the four of us aboard, no supplies or anything, we could make it all the way to Colorado Springs in one shot."

"We're not invited."

"But they'd let us in, wouldn't they? I mean the things he described . . ."

Jergens had gotten talkative as hell as he'd led us around. Yessiree, boys, we got us a National Redoubt! Expanded and dug out around Cheyenne Mountain, where NORAD was until just the other day. Atom-bomb-proof housing for eighteen thousand souls. Freeze dried food to last a thousand years.

Even now, a fleet of C-5s and suchlike were running back and forth between Florida and Colorado, hauling as much of Cape Canaveral as would fit into a great big old cavern under the mountains. No, not a natural one. Something we'd dug back in the fifties, with an H-bomb. And nobody even noticed.

And, after the rainout, we'll be putting it together on what's left of the surface, you see, because life, if you can call it that, goes on.

Paul said, "Even if it lives through the rainout, the plane will be useless. No air. So if we're going to go, it has to be soon. You think once the truth comes out, once it's clear the Sun's not coming back, they'll try to expand the Redoubt for more survivors? Maybe then . . ."

I shook my head. "Probably kill anybody who shows up."

Silence.

After a while, I said, "Paulie, I thought of something else."

He looked at me, face expressionless.

I said, "We need to do some work on the Antarctic Cat. Otherwise it won't run either. Afterward."

He got a scared look. "I don't know if . . ."

"It won't be that difficult. There's cargo space we can rig for air tanks. We can get plenty from a SCUBA store. There's one down at the mall."

"You really think the engine can be rigged to run in a vacuum?" Obvious doubt.

"Suck, squeeze, bang, and blow. So it can suck from canned air and blow through a valve. That'll keep the fuel from being sucked through the intake manifold and blown out the exhaust. Simple enough."

Silence. Then he said, "Won't work. It'll leak through every gasket. Gases will blow around the rings. The engine's designed to operate in a one-thousand millibar environment."

I said, "Look, we have to come up with a way to seal and pressurize the passenger compartment anyway. So we'll just do the same thing to the engine compartment."

Another long silence, then, "Why do you think we need a mooncar?"

I swallowed, staring at him, at his big, wide, scared-looking dark eyes. "Because if the main shelter doesn't survive the rainout, we'll have a limited time in the capsule." I heard him take a sharp breath, almost a gasp, then he looked away, twisting in his seat, looking down into the darkness unfolding below.

When we got to Hagerstown, Maryland, banking in the sky, turning southward for home, the town was still lit up, street lights twinkling, even a few cars still moving on the streets. People down there still doing just fine, watching things on their satellite TVs, waiting for November Dawn.

Though only a day had gone by, Red Sulfur Springs seemed a lot darker as we came over the hills, grainy-eyed, heading for home. Paul yawned, fiddling with this and that, squinting at the darkness, peering at his instruments. "Damn if I can find . . ."

I said, "I don't see the mall."

There were still lights, but scattered in bits and blotches, forming up neighborhoods, but no longer enough to pick out the local road system. Off to our left, there was a string of streetlights surrounded by empty black. Paul said, "Two-twenty? Jesus, I'm not sure I can . . ." He started banking us toward the lights.

I rummaged in my pockets, until I found my old Nokia analog cell phone, pulling up the antenna, hitting the power button.

"You didn't call Connie?"

You were with me the whole time, doofus. "No. I forgot. Too much excitement." I dialed our home phone and got the system message saying it couldn't get through. Well, the land-lines were down when we left. "Hey, at least the cellular system's still up!" Remember Fran? Power was out for a week, the regular phones for two, but the cells kept right on beeping. I dialed Connie's number.

"Well?"

"Ringing. No answer."

"Try mine." Bip-bip-bip . . . brief pause, then it started chirping in his pocket.

He said, "Cool!" reaching for his zipper.

"Don't *answer* it, jerkoff!" I hit end, dialed Julia's phone, hit send again. "Voice mail?" Incredible.

"Their phones must be switched off. Jesus, you'd think they'd be anxious to hear from us. . . ." He hit a switch and the landing gear whined down, lights coming on, plane shuddering and shivering around us. We were floating over a divided highway, mostly empty, covered with unmarked, drifting snow. Once, we passed over a big, square car, half buried in white.

Paul sighed. "Well, it *looks* like two-twenty. If it is, we're about a mile, maybe mile-and-a-half from the mall." He pushed forward on the wheel, plane beginning a slow drift downward.

I leaned toward the windshield, trying to look forward, where our lights were splashing on the ground. "I see power lines."

I see dead people? "Yeah."

"There's a big parking lot off to our right."

He banked us that way and, suddenly, we were passing over the dark, snowy hulk of Red Sulfur Mall. Dark, but there were still plenty of cars in the lot, little pools of pale light clustered here and there. Maybe people with flashlights? No way to know.

Paul suddenly banked us hard right. "Facing the wrong God-damned way!"

I grabbed a handhold, putting my face up against the cold window glass. There was a big splotch of yellow light coming over a nearby hill, outlining it like a big, black hump. "Hey, I see it! They've got the floods on!" Vaguely heart-warming, Connie and Julia hearing our engines, waiting for us. Home. Hearth. Et cetera. Though the *et cetera* was what I mainly had in mind.

Paul leveled the plane, fussing and scrabbling at the controls. "Runway! Where's the *runway*?"

"How the hell do *I* know, Paulie?"

He looked at me, pop-eyed, then faced forward again, pale as could be.

Just like in Philly, huh, Paulie?

The ground rose up, brilliant snow reflecting white light back in our eyes, then we hit, plane bumping along, lurching and yawing. I swear one wheel came off the ground, one wheel alone, the wingtip on my side dragging for just a second, slewing us around, throwing up a rooster-tail so short I could see both ends of the arc flying, then it came down again, Paul yodeling something I couldn't make out.

Thud. Down. Paul snapping switches and doing things.

The lights went out and we were still, sitting there in the darkness, Paul panting like an exhausted horse.

"Jesus," he whispered. "Jesus, I just can't do this."

I sat, looking out through the windshield at the lights from the house, waiting for two slim figures to appear, outlined black before us. Come running, Connie. Come running, Julia. We're home.

Nothing.

After a minute, I said, "Well, you'll never have to do it again, Paulie. Unless you feel like going for a joyride."

Nothing.

"Might as well . . ."

"Yeah."

We got out of the plane through our separate side doors, and I stretched in the freezing, freezing cold. Without the balaklava, I could feel my nostrils pinching, little twinges suggesting they'd freeze shut given the slightest opportunity. The hangar was in front of us, dark, closed. I reached in my pocket, found the mask and goggles, and pulled them on. No sense getting frostbite on the short walk to the hotel. "Come on. We can unload the plane and put it away later."

Paul said, "No, I'll be too tired later. Let's do it now." He looked toward the light, breath making a long white plume against the black sky. "Where the hell are they? We can't drag the plane indoors by ourselves!"

I said, "You start unloading the cargo. I'll go get a forklift, and see what's keeping . . ."

BAM!

There was a little explosion in the snow beside me, snow rising in a white fountain, casting a long black shadow under the plane, pointing away from the light.

Paulie looked at it, open mouth a big black Oh! in his pale white face.

I looked toward the light.

BAM!

There was a quick orange flicker from low down, right on the snow, up by the crest of a low hill marking the birm over the garage, just a sliver of light, snow fountaining right in front of me, splashing like dust on my chest, bullet's impact with the ground making my boots go *thump*.

I turned, graceful as can be, flying, rolling under the plane, coming out the other side, butting Paul with my head. "Oof!" Like a cartoon character. Biff. Bam. Pow.

BAMwhack!

Something hit the plane, making it rock hard.

That vision again. Who's the star this time? Mel Gibson? Does ole Mel ever get burning avgas all over that pretty white butt of his? I reached up and pulled the SKSs from the rack through Paul's open door.

BAMziiingg!

It hit the engine cowling that time, and ricocheted away into the night.

Paul whispered, "Not a very good shot, whoever he is."

Can't you *guess*, Paulie? Jesus. I said, "You get behind the landing gear and start taking potshots at the bastard. Try not to expose yourself. I'll get back into the shadows, go around the hotel and get him from behind."

BAM!

This time the fountain of snow was almost fifteen feet away. *Really* a bad shot.

Paul said, "You think you can capture him?"

"I don't intend to try. If I can get a clear shot, I'll drill the son of a bitch right through the back of the head." Try to kill *me*? I felt my face and neck suddenly grow hot, like a fevered flush. Like embarrassment without the fear.

Rage.

Paul said, "Who . . ."

"Never mind." I faded back into the darkness, crawling back about fifty feet, then getting up, running to the right, circling toward the hotel counter-clockwise, looking toward the light. This hill of trees? Maybe I won't have to go all the way round. . . .

BAM!

Nowhere near me. Still shooting at the plane.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

The SKS was crisp and clean, little puffs of snow bracketing where I knew he had to be. Good show, Paulie-boy.

BAM!

What the hell could he be using? One of the hunting rifles we'd bought because we didn't know any better? Thirty-thirty? Ought-six? That'll make a nice little mess out of me.

Crack! Crack!

Careful, Paulie. Don't waste 'em. I started up the side of the hill, keeping low.

Gary's voice boomed out, "Scott?" *Crack!*

"Scott! *Talk* to me, you bastard!"

I heard Julia yell, "*Please!* Please, Gary. Don't . . ."

Paul shouted, "Scott's hurt! I think he's *bleeding!*"

Good! Good one, Paulie!

Connie screamed, "Scott? Oh, *God!*"

What the hell is *wrong* with you people? Jesus, Connie! There's two of you and only one of him.

Gary said, "Throw out your gun, Paul! You can't win!"

To my astonishment, Paul's SKS flew out from the plane, spinning into the snow about ten feet away. He said, "Please! Scott's hurt bad! I think he may be dying!"

What the hell, Paulie? A strategy that relies on mental telepathy? Or did you think Gary will be like the IRS? Kill me and maybe you can have Connie for your reward?

Gary said, "Scott's gun too!" And then he stood up without waiting for it, silhouetted against the light.

I leveled my gun and *Crack!*

Gary spun, rifle flying up in the air, shouting something, then grabbed himself low on the left side and fell into the snow. Damn. I'm a better shot than *that*. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Paul dive out from under the plane and run forward, stooping to grab his SKS as he ran. Connie and Julia were black stick figures on the hill, running together.

I got up and ran too, stumbling downhill through deep snow, knowing I'd get there last.

"Bastard! Bastard!" Paul was flailing over him, hitting him clumsily

with the butt of the SKS, trying to smash him in the face, mostly pounding on his hands and arms. Jesus, that's got to smart. Gary was rolling in the snow, trying to get his head out of the way, leaving red splotches here and there.

Connie and Julia were flapping around them, arms waving like a couple of big, flightless birds, Julia crying out, "Paul! Please don't hurt him, Paul!"

Why the hell does it have to be like this? Am I stuck in some damn Romance Classics drama?

I reached out and grabbed Paul's arm. "That's enough, Paulie."

Julia was on her knees beside Gary now, hugging him, crying, trying to cradle his head in her arms. I could see Gary's eyes were open, reflecting the light, beady and dark, looking at me.

I held the SKS where he could see it.

Connie said, "Oh, Scott . . ." Terror on her face, looking at me. What, Connie? Afraid *he'll* die now instead of me?

I looked her right in the eye, and said, "Is there anyone else?"

She shook her head.

"No Ron?"

She flinched. "No. I changed my mind about that."

Changed your mind. I felt my insides clench. "Why?"

She said, "Because this is forever, Scott. Ron was just . . . about my . . . job."

"Why'd you let this happen?" I gestured with my rifle, down at the man on the ground.

She said, "Julia loves Gary, Scott. Can't you understand that?"

When I looked down at Julia, she was looking up at me, holding her man, and she whispered, "Please, Scott . . ."

I glanced at Paul. "So . . ."

He shrugged, not looking at me, staring down at Julia, face expressionless. Clever, clever Paulie. You'd shoot him yourself and love to watch him die, but then Julia would never, um, *enjoy* herself with you again.

Connie said, "What are you going to do?"

I said, "Where's his car?"

"In the garage."

"Good. Go get it."

Julia said, "Oh, God, Scott. Paul, *please* . . ." Ridiculous tears in her voice.

I said, "Go with her."

She said, "No."

I felt a sudden impulse, something trying to make my hand reach out and strike her. "Listen, you goddam b—"

Paul snapped, "*Scott.*"

I looked at him. "Oh, don't worry, Paulie. If I ever hit a girl, my mommy would rise up out of the grave and pull my balls off." Ah, yes. When will *that* moral compass decay?

Connie leaned down and took Julia by the arm. "Come on. We'll . . . talk."

Yeah. Talk. Y'all are good at that. I watched them walk slowly away toward the side door of the garage. When they were out of earshot, I looked

down at Gary, who appeared to be bleeding nicely. Eyes still beady and lit up, though. Paying attention.

I said, "Look, Gary, that's obviously not a bad wound, or you'd be dead already. You can drive yourself on over to the emergency room at Red Sulphur Springs Community Hospital and get 'em to take that bullet out."

He said, "I think it went all the way through." Voice nice and level. Calm. You're tougher than I thought, Gary.

I said, "Well, you need it treated anyway. Get some antibiotics. Stitches. Whatever. Think you can drive okay?"

He sat up, wincing, and Paul took a step back, aiming his rifle. "Yeah."

I said, "If you come back again, I'll kill you immediately. No more chances, Gary."

He looked up at Paul, looking right up the barrel of his gun. "Julia's coming with me."

Are you stupid? Or living in your own little movie? The one where the hero never dies. "No she's not. I need Paul and Paul needs Julia."

He stood up, groaning a little, not too theatrically, just enough, like any good actor. "You won't get away with this. The police . . ."

I laughed. "I'm sure Connie will agree you shot first." I sighed. "Look, this is all going to be over in just a couple of more weeks. We talked to a NASA guy up in Philly who said the sun's coming back in eighteen more days, okay?" You could see the surprise brightening his face. "So you just find yourself a nice, tight house with a couple of wood stoves. Stoke up and try to survive as best you can. As soon as the sun comes out, Julia will know the jig is up. She'll leave us right then and there, and there won't be a thing little *Paulie* here can do about it."

Paul looked at me, face hard and confused. "Scott?"

I laughed. "Don't be stupid. Keep your gun on him."

Gary's face was overflowing with anger and contempt. "I'll get you for this, if it's the last thing I ever do."

I said, "Oh, don't worry, Gary-boy. By this time next year, Paulie and I will be sitting in prison, probably looking at *life*, you know? You can be with Julia every night and imagine us in jail."

I saw him smirk, then the garage door started to rumble open.

Paul said, "Jesus, Scott . . ."

I thought, Yeah, let's don't overdo it, huh, Paulie?

I said, "Let's go," gesturing with the rifle. "Get his gun, Paul. It's over there somewhere."

When we walked him over, Gary's pickup truck was sitting in the driveway, engine thudding over, exhaust making a big white cloud, casting a wide shadow from the floods, headlights making a brilliant pattern of reflections off the snow, throwing long shadows up the big hill where the woods used to be.

Funny. If the snow ever melted, there they'd be, snapped off, lying down in rows where the snowcanes left them. I remembered walking through Duke Forest after Hurricane Fran. Trying to anyway. In some areas, *all* of the trees had come down and were laying in great tangled piles, sideways trees stacked this way and that, thirty, forty, fifty feet deep.

The rains *will* come, wash the snow away, wash the trees away, wash the ground away . . . I shivered. Wash us away? What will it be *like*? No way to know.

Like trying to imagine the experience of the passengers in a deadly plane crash.

Instantaneous?

Or like all the tortures of Hell accompanying you into the void?

Gary took a step toward the passenger's side, and said, "Julia, can you drive? I'm hurting." I could see Paul tense up, gripping his rifle. Keep it up, Gary.

Julia hesitated, took a step forward. Connie reached out and put a hand on her arm, staring at her, holding her gaze. Nice tableau.

I said, "I think you have to drive, Gary. Sorry."

He put his hand on the door handle. "Julia. Now."

I lifted my SKS, pointing it at the middle of Gary's back, and said, "Julia, no one's holding you here against your will. But if you go, you can't come back."

Paul made some kind of grunting noise.

Gary said, "Julia? Please."

Nothing. I looked at Connie, but she kept her eyes on the other woman's face. Behind us, the garage door was gaping open, all lit up inside, huge pall of water vapor condensing and rising toward the stars. Born in a barn, kiddies?

I said, "Julia, either get in the God-damned truck, or go inside."

Gary turned toward me, suddenly looking down at the rifle in my hands. There was a big stain, black in the floodlit night, disfiguring the side of his coat.

"Better get in and go, Gary-boy. You *could* bleed to death, you know."

Julia suddenly broke and ran for the house, burbling sobs as she stumbled through the snow, up the steps and across the porch, slamming the door behind her.

Connie waited a second, looking like she wanted to say something, then turned and went after her.

"Okay, Gary. Now you know."

He walked slowly around the front of the truck, maybe conscious of my muzzle a yard from his back, Paul a little farther away, too far for any sort of foolish, desperate grab. He got in, face buckling from the pain, looking like he might be turning gray, reached out for the handle, paused and looked at me. "When it's over," he said, "I'll be back."

I said, "That only works with an Austrian accent."

He grinned, suddenly uglier than I remembered. "I used to bang Connie whenever you weren't around. We did it on your kitchen table once."

I smiled. "I'll be waiting for you, buddy-boy."

He slammed the door, put the truck in gear, stomping on the gas, showering us with snow. We could hear his engine for a long time, roaring down the road on his way into town. It'll be funny when he gets to the hospital and finds it cold and dark. No lights in that part of town as we flew over. Wish I could be there to see it.

Paul blew out a giant cloud of hot breath, filling the air between us

with a faint garlic scent, lowering his gun at last. "Kitchen table?" You could see his mood had lightened. Misery loves company?

I shrugged. "Come on. Let's go inside before we freeze to death."

He turned and stared at the hotel, something on his face almost like fear, then turned and started walking toward the open garage door.

It was nice and warm inside, filled with the fine odors of recent cooking. Maybe an hour went by before Paulie wondered if anybody'd seen Pa-prika lately. Julia looked up slowly, face all puffy and red, and whispered, "Gary . . . doesn't like cats."

The expression on Connie's face was educational as well. She went out in the dark with Paul and they looked for a while, but it was too damned cold.

I sat in bed later, warm at last, eating greasy cold chicken and watching Connie get undressed. What the hell is it about cold chicken that's so satisfying? The congealed chicken fat?

Connie was standing in front of the mirror, facing it, her back toward me as she took off first one thing and then another, draping each item gracefully over the back of a chair. When she was naked, she continued to stand there, looking at herself, face in the mirror expressionless.

Somewhere in the house, we could hear Paul's voice in a high-pitched shout, the querulous whine he used in all his arguments with Julia, citing chapter and verse as he beat her down with supposed logic. *Fairness*. That's the word he likes to use.

What a striking woman. Dark red hair falling down her long neck, not quite to shoulders not quite square, sloping just right. The long line of her spine framed by a muscular back, narrow waist flaring to hips generous enough, but not too generous. Buttocks and thighs just so. When she puts her legs together, you can see a little light, but not too much.

I felt my heart clench in my chest, abdomen going just a little watery. Why don't I feel I deserve a woman like this?

In the distance, I could hear Julia snapping back at Paul, biting off bitter words, one by one.

Connie said, "What did Gary say to you after we left?"

Is it that obvious, Connie dear? I said, "He revealed to me that you and he had an affair, some time back. Something about a kitchen table."

In the mirror, her face suddenly turned the most beautiful shade of pink, flush climbing up her cheekbones, then spreading down her chest, stopping just short of her breasts. Her eyes dropped, looking down, lids seeming to close.

Oops. Can't look yourself in the eye anymore? Fat chance. I said, "Why didn't you tell me?"

She said, "It . . . it just happened, Scott. A long time ago. I'm sorry."

I felt something start to curdle in my chest.

She turned around then, looking at me directly, blush fading, first from her chest, then her cheeks. Once again, the clench, the softening down below. If I'd seen her in a magazine, I wouldn't have been surprised to find her there.

She said, "I knew about that little fat cowgirl of yours, Scott. The one from the HDC mailroom. Paul told Julia."

My pal Paul. I said, "Is that why you gave Gary a shot? Get back at me?"

She shook her head, looking down, so demure, like . . . well, no, not an angel. Some other mythological figure. Something more fun than an angel maybe. "I don't know. Probably not. It's not like it was the first . . ."

I said, "Your little masseur pal?"

Flicker of surprise in her eyes. As if she expected me not to know. "Are we really such awful people, Scott?"

Somewhere down below, I heard Julia's voice raised in a howl of rage. Silence. Then a loud crash, something breaking. A lamp maybe? Some dishes? Hope it's not the TV. "Jesus."

She smiled and crawled up onto the bed, slithering toward me, putting her head on my thigh, right next to the plate of cold chicken. "We're not like that, at least."

I could hear Paul shouting now. Telling her she was a whore. Paulie's jealous because *he* doesn't get to be a whore. The rest of it seemed to be about the cat.

Connie said, "I do love you, you know."

Yeah. We do have that. Whatever it is. I put the chicken aside for later.

The Antarctic Cat rumbled to a stop in the Mall's dark parking lot, headlights glinting off a scattering of parked cars, all of them dusted with blown snow, probably abandoned here when they refused to start, crystals making them glitter like so many complex jewels. Some of them were clear and empty; others were frosted over, so you couldn't tell what was inside. Paulie said, "We shouldn't have left them alone."

I could feel the Cat throbbing under me, engine idling, every once in a while twitching slightly, like my heart skipping a beat. "Gary's probably dead by now. You know that." No hospital. Bleeding to death maybe. Or freezing to death when his gas ran out.

He said, "Still."

Yeah. "Well. This'll be the last time. We need air tanks, regulators, and a compressor from the diving store. There's an auto supply place down that end. Sheet metal. Pop rivets. Welding machines. Make sure we get arc and gas. Everything we can find. Silicone gasket sealer. DAP guns."

"You really think we can make it work? In a vacuum, I mean."

I shrugged. "Who knows? We'll probably lose it anyway when the birm collapses. No harm trying."

"We better get the dozers out too. Get as much material as we can over the birm and tamped down before it gets too cold. We hit minus-eighty this morning."

Going down fast.

I fished in my pocket, making damn sure I had the spare keys, then reached back for my rifle. "Let's go. The sooner we get back, the less chance . . . Make sure you lock your door." Be funny as hell if someone stole our Cat, huh, Paulie?

He said, "Leave the lights on, too. They'll help illuminate the inside of the mall."

I opened the door, letting in a blast of the coldest air imaginable, and

we got out and walked across the pavement, blacktop cracked with frost heaves, covered with a thin layer of icy grit, Cat idling behind us, diesel exhaust towering away into the dark sky.

Paulie whispered, "Look at the stars!"

Wall to wall, flooding the sky, making it seem almost flat somehow, then making it look infinitely deep when I thought how far away they really were. The Cone was a dark circle down by the eastern horizon, letting me know it was still morning.

"You ever wonder if anybody ever figured out what made this happen, Paulie?"

Nothing.

"You try that cellular modem yet?"

He shook his head. "I guess I should, before it gets too late. Cellular system won't last forever. We've been so busy. And Julia . . ."

There were some people lying dead by the main doors of the mall, a skinny white guy in blue jeans and a light windbreaker, face revealed in our flashlight beams frozen in a grimace, crooked teeth exposed, eyes half open. A keg-shaped black woman, flat on her back, spread-eagled, wearing a floral print dress and fluffy-bunny slippers, two little kids huddled beside her, a boy and a girl; one tucked under each arm.

Paul reached out and rattled the door handle. "Locked." He stepped back and fired one round through the glass, which obediently shattered and fell to the ground, spreading shards over the corpses like so many oddly shaped gemstones.

I said, "Law-abiding citizens, afraid to break in."

We could hear the gunfire echoing far away, knowing Connie and Julia would hear it. Suppose they hope it's Gary getting even? Julia, maybe. I followed Paul through the door and we walked down a wide dark hall, past the usual crapshops, selling stuff you can't imagine anyone will ever buy. Tuxedo rental. Bridal shop. Jewelers. All clustered together for the convenience of the foolish.

There was a girl in the food court, maybe fifteen or so, with long blond hair, tied across one of those orange plastic chairs, arms tied to one set of chair legs, thighs tied to the other, knees well apart, tied face down, wearing a dark blouse but nothing else. I could see a pair of jeans and some expensive-looking sneakers in a pile off to one side.

I could see Paul's eyes moving behind his goggles, little sparkles of light flickering here and there as he looked her over.

I said, "Well. Let's go. We've got stuff to do."

He turned his masked face to me, staring for a long moment. "People . . ." he gestured at the dead girl. "Man. What you suppose it's *like* out there?"

"We'll never know. Come on. Dive shop's this way. Maybe we can use shopping carts from the Rose's to haul stuff."

He said, "Oh, they probably have a few hand trucks left somewhere."

The garage door rumbled down, Cat and cargo stowed, then Paulie and I walked through our buried dreamland and up the stairs to the hotel. Connie and Julia were in the lounge, watching TV, and lunch was on the coffee table before the couch, sandwiches cut in triangles, salami, bologna,

tuna salad, pickles, sour-cream-and-onion flavored chips, glasses of Coke, IBC cream soda, high-resolution root beer, and my favorite, flat, lifeless grape soda.

"What's going on?"

Connie looked up at me, then back at the TV, where I could see a huge pool of flame lighting up an enormous, flat, snowless landscape. She said, "Somebody set off a hydrogen bomb in Moscow."

I looked at the contrasty, colorful image, trying to make out city details, if any remained, finding nothing. Jesus. More than one, from the looks of it. "Did they say how big?"

She shrugged, picking up a triangle of tuna salad. "Maybe. I don't remember."

Not like you to be this cold, Constance. Where's the horror? The compassion? All those millions of people dead in a flash. . . . She looked at me again, watching my eyes, maybe looking to see if I felt anything either. I guess if you can't care about a lost kittycat, what do a few million people matter?

Paul said, "The suburban shelters will have made it through okay."

"They said there was rioting in Moscow just before it went off." Julia said. "There was a CNN correspondent on the air when it happened."

"Which one?"

"That guy from the Gulf Wars. The one with the beard and the silly name."

"Were you watching?"

Connie said, "Yes. It didn't look like much."

Then Julia: "Some bright light came through the windows behind him, lighting up all the people in the street for a second, then the picture froze. He seemed surprised."

After lunch, Paulie and I went back outside for our usual noontime perimeter walk. Not much point in it anymore, but it seemed like the only time we could talk about stuff, feel private, maybe a little bit like our old selves, as if we were kids again, sneaking out in the middle of the night, meeting down by the creek for some adventure or another. Where are we tonight, Paulie, Venus or Jupiter? Are we Älendar and Raitearyón again, or will it be Kantol Hav of Lansinar and Onol of Aceta, this time?

Noon. Christ. Up in the sky, close to zenith, where the sun should have been, was that big black disk, surrounded by a sea of bright stars. False stars, I thought. And they're all gone now, so-called Cone of Annihilation twisted around the Riemannian curvature of the universe, wrapped around the sky, back behind the stars . . .

I remember once we got Jupiter invented, we liked to play Venus in the summer and Jupiter in the winter, wandering the high snowy plains beyond the Guardians of Jove, between the Trankor Ocean and the Devara Sea, the cold land beyond the Kalss Desert, beyond Kerens Ans and Aaaboïu, west of Moldon and Ej Ganen.

Those were the first stories we wrote, even before *The Venusians*, remember, Paulie? "The War in Aceta" and "Revenge of the Plant Men." The

beginning, Paulie. The very beginning. Where might the end have been, if only . . .

We stopped for a minute, puffing, blowing out plumes of frosty condensate on the side of our familiar old hill, where Paul turned, twisting his head back to see where I was looking. "What d'you think?" he said. "Anything."

Tempted to make some wise-ass remark. No, Paulie. I never think on my own. I'm just a fucking robot, remember. But I said, "All things we talked about? The things we guessed? Some natural disaster, a plausible anti-event to cancel out the Big Bang?"

He snickered. "The Big Suck. That's what we called it."

All the speculations we come up with, gone round and round, arguing eloquently, forcefully, often angrily, just like it was real . . . Jesus. I said, "Remember how pissed off you got when I wouldn't buy your alien-invasion scenario?"

Moment of silence, the two of us seeming as inert as ever, no matter how real our nightmare had become. He said, "Yeah. And all of it was bullshit."

"Yep." I turned away, starting up the last little bit of the hill. "All except the part about it being the end of the world."

He only grunted, gasping with the effort of climbing up our icy old hill. What difference does all of it make *now*, huh, Paulie? You wanna keep on arguing? Maybe we'll get it figured out if only we scream at each other enough? I wanted to say all that, but I didn't. Because the world is going to end, real soon now, and the odds are we'll never know why.

From the top of the big hill, you could see most of Red Sulfur Springs was dark now, a few islands of light here and there, mostly houses with individual generators standing alone. People dying fast now, I suppose.

Images from old movies. The guy who builds the atomic bomb shelter, and what happens to him when the sirens begin to wail, heralding World War Three. In the movie, it always turns out to be a false alarm. An object lesson in humanity.

So what object lessons are they learning right now, out there by those little pools of light?

Paul stiffened suddenly, holding up one hand.

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"Something?"

"Sh!"

Then he spun, looking toward the highway, pointing, and when I turned, not wanting to see anything but more dark, there were headlights coming along the stretch of two-twenty we could see from the top of the hill. "Six," I said, "maybe seven?"

They started to slow down as they got to the end of our driveway. Slowing down, not quite to a stop, turning our way. "Let's get back to the hotel."

We ran.

By the time the cars were circling into the main driveway, Paulie and I had gotten back down the hill, going in and grabbing the guns we'd left behind in our confidence, confident that not enough people were left alive anymore for there to be much risk. Stupid. I grabbed an SKS and a couple of clips, stopped Paulie from picking up the other one, pointing to the street sweeper on the rack. "Make sure the drum's fully loaded."

Connie and Julia were getting up from the couch, Connie looking scared, Julia somehow excited, as if she were expecting . . . oh, *man*. Now what? Then we were outside again, standing together with our guns cradled at ready, waiting for the people, whoever they were, to get out.

Paul said, "Like the *Twilight Zone* or something."

You could see people in the cars, people all bundled up in hoods, hats and parkas, looking back at us. I said, "Dee-dee, dee-dee . . ."

The driver's side door of the lead car opened, disgorging what looked like a man, tall, heavy-looking right through the coat. Then another opened, and another, then all the rest together, until there were maybe thirty people standing on our lawn, including some little kids. One woman was holding a baby.

The tall, heavyset guy stepped forward, pulling back his hood to show a round bald head, and called out, "Hiya, Scott! Long time no see!"

My old buddy, Melvin Leibig, my supervisor back at the good old Health Data Consultancy. I looked over the rest, recognizing some, not others. There was a much shorter man standing beside Leibig, wearing one of those Russian fur hats, wearing glasses, big black mustache hanging off his upper lip. I said, "Well, well. Mel. Lex. What brings you all the way up here?"

From right behind me, Julia shouted, "Jane! Shelly! Glad you could make it!"

I turned a half-step, hit her in the temple with my rifle butt, and she fell bonelessly to the porch floor. Connie was back by the door, face dead white, one hand over her mouth, eyes big, looking at me, not Julia, not the crowd.

Somebody down on the lawn said, "Jesus Christ."

Behind me, I could hear Connie trying to help Julia, then dragging her inside. The door shut with a slam and I heard the dead bolt snap into its socket.

I whispered to Paul, "If I give the word, you just start mowing them

down fast as you can. But not until I say, *capisc?*" Like a cartoon character again, some ridiculous TV mafioso.

Paul's chin jerked up and down, once, twice, no more. What, Paulie, glad I disciplined your little lady? Bet she'll think twice before giving you any more lip, huh? I smiled inside my mask, imagining a TV gun-battle, Paul letting me take the heat alone, and, afterward, the hurt look on his face: Why didn't I fire? Well, you didn't say *capisc*. . . .

Oh, Jesus. Mind wandering again. I just don't want to deal with it.

I stepped forward, so the floods could light me up, me, my rifle, goggles and mask, like a monster from outer space, and said, "None of you are welcome here. Some of you are my friends, I know, but . . ." Off to one side, I could see Asa Brandt and his wife, standing close together. I looked directly at them. "I'm sorry."

Alexis Goffo, Executive Director of HDC, from whom I had stolen the money to build this place, stepped forward, grinning, holding out one hand imploringly. "Oh, you can't mean that, Scott!"

"Why not?"

Some woman, Shelly or Jane or some such, called out, "Julia *told* us! The sun's never coming back!"

Goffo seemed to sneer, putting his hands on his hips. "Come on, Scott. I know you. You won't leave us out here to die."

"Guess again. Start your cars up before the engines freeze. Now."

His grin vanished, white teeth going behind the mustache, and he said, "Well. We're not leaving, Scott." He glanced around at the others. "I mean, do you think thirty people can't—"

I shot him high in the chest, bullet striking at the top of his breastbone, right below the vee of his throat. His hands went up, elbows high, clutching at himself like Zapruder's Kennedy, then he flew backward and down, hit his head on a car bumper, kind of sliding half under the left front wheel.

Silence.

I shouted, "Time to go!"

Nothing.

Mel took a step forward, scalp shining, making me wonder if the sweat was freezing on his skin. "Scott. Please . . ."

I got him right between the eyes, and, somehow, the top of his head flew off, flipping up in the air, stuff from inside splashing all over the people beside him. His legs buckled and he dropped to his knees before falling over backward.

I said, "There's nobody else here I really wanted to kill. The rest of you better go now." They started getting in their cars by ones and twos and threes, and I saw Asa and his wife just standing there for the longest time, even while the engines were starting. Finally, they turned away, shoulders sagging, thinking who knows what.

"Ben!"

A slight figure in a peacoat and knit cap turned away from a pickup truck, looking up at me, face mostly hidden by beard. I motioned with my rifle toward one side of the lawn, then said, "Watch 'em."

Paul said, "Nobody else. We agreed."

"Yeah. We did."

When I walked up to my friend Ben Millikan, I could see the hope in his face, like a knife in my chest. "Look, I'm sorry I can't let you in."

He turned toward the hotel and driveway, watching the cars pull away one by one. At least two people managed to run over Lex's body on the way out, his legs kicking like he was still alive and feeling it. Finally, he said, "Sure does look like you've got enough room, Scott."

"Yeah. But we don't."

Eyes on my face, waiting.

So I told him about the Cone, while the cars went down the driveway and out on the road, then told him about the rainout to come while the sound of their tires faded into the distance.

Long silence, eyes on me still. Then he said, "Like 'The Cold Equations.'"

"Well, no, not really. But you get the idea."

"What am I going to do?"

"You're going to die, and probably so are we."

He looked away, maybe not wanting me to see what was on his face.

I said, "I didn't see Katy here."

"No. I asked her to come. She wouldn't. But she's okay. We've still got power."

I said, "Go back to Chapel Hill. Find Katy. Tell her."

"Why?"

I handed him the SKS. "You'll need that. Look, you and Katy find yourselves a nice tight house, get some heaters together, hole up. Tell her I said she was to hump the bejesus out of you for as long as it lasts."

The expression on his face was maybe a little like anger. "As what lasts?"

"The world, Ben."

Another long silence. "You think she will?"

"Will what?"

"Um . . ."

"Didn't you ever ask?"

"No."

"You should have."

"Maybe so."

I said, "Look, when the rainout starts, if you haven't already frozen to death, you'll know it, maybe get a few minutes' warning before the building caves in. A bullet will be quick. For both of you. Just don't hesitate too long, or you'll be sorry."

When I held out my hand, he shook it, then tucked the SKS under his arm, went back to his pickup and drove away into the dark. And I thought about what it might've been like, had he brought Katy along. Both of them, then? Would Connie have stood for that?

Back up on the porch, Paul said, "We better get rid of those." Pointing at Mel and Lex and a bloody mess in the snow.

"Um. Yeah."

He said, "Did you enjoy it?"

I stopped on the lawn, looking back at him.

Then I said, "Yes." ○

Why I Chose
a Robot Body
and Have Never Regretted It

No more nicotine fits.

Best set of choppers I've ever had.

None of those annoying episodes
when I felt impossibly horny
and could sometimes satisfy it
and sometimes not.

Fried foods, spicy foods,
things not even considered food
... not a problem!

I'm a much better chess player
than I ever thought I could be.

No longer have to search for
the right tool for the job.

I've stopped looking at myself
in the mirror and fixing my hair.
I'm made of metal. That's a fact.

I can wear all the bumper
stickers I want.

—Bruce Boston

DOWN MEMORY LANE

Mike Resnick

Hugo- and Nebula-winner Mike Resnick follows 2004's "Travels with My Cats" (February 2004) and "A Princess of Earth" (December 2004) with this moving tale of love and sacrifice. Watch for Mike's latest novels, *A Gathering of Widowmakers* and *Lady with an Alien*, which will hit the stores shortly.

Gwendolyn sticks a finger into her cake, pulls it out, and licks it with a happy smile on her face.

"I like birthdays!" she says, giggling with delight.

I lean over and wipe some frosting off her chin. "Try to be a little neater," I say. "You wouldn't want to have to take a bath before you open your present."

"Present?" she repeats excitedly, her gaze falling on the box with the colorful wrapping paper and the big satin bow. "Is it time for my present now? Is it?"

"Yes, it is," I answer. I pick up the box and hand it to her. "Happy birthday, Gwendolyn."

She tears off the paper, shoves the card aside, and opens the box. An instant later she emits a happy squeal and pulls out the rag doll. "This is my very favorite day of my whole life!" she announces.

I sigh and try to hold back my tears.

Gwendolyn is eighty-two years old. She has been my wife for the last sixty of them.

I don't know where I was when Kennedy was shot. I don't know what I was doing when the World Trade Center collapsed under the onslaught of two jetliners. But I remember every single detail, every minute, every second, of the day we got the bad news.

"It may not be Alzheimer's," said Dr. Castleman. "Alzheimer's is becoming a catchword for a variety of senile dementias. Eventually we'll find out exactly which dementia it is, but there's no question that Gwendolyn is suffering from one of them."

It wasn't a surprise—after all, we knew something was wrong; that's why she was being examined—but it was still a shock.

"Is there any chance of curing it?" I asked, trying to keep my composure.

He shook his head sadly. "Right now we're barely able to slow it down."

"How long have I got?" said Gwendolyn, her face grim, her jaw set.

"Physically you're in fine shape," said Castleman. "You could live another ten to twenty years."

"How long before I don't know who anyone is?" she persisted.

He shrugged helplessly. "It proceeds at different rates with different people. At first you won't notice any diminution, but before long it will become noticeable, perhaps not to you, but to those around you. And it doesn't progress in a straight line. One day you'll find you've lost the ability to read, and then, perhaps two months later, you'll see a newspaper headline, or perhaps a menu in a restaurant, and you'll read it as easily as you do today. Paul here will be elated and think you're regaining your capacity, and he'll call me and tell me about it, but it won't last. In another day, another hour, another week, the ability will be gone again."

"Will I know what's happening to me?"

"That's almost the only good part of it," replied Castleman. "You know now what lies ahead of you, but as it progresses you will be less and less aware of any loss of your cognitive abilities. You'll be understandably bitter at the start, and we'll put you on anti-depressants, but the day will come when you no longer need them because you no longer remember that you ever had a greater mental capacity than you possess at that moment."

She turned to me. "I'm sorry, Paul."

"It's not your fault," I said.

"I'm sorry that you'll have to watch this happen to me."

"There must be something we can do, some way we can fight it. . . ." I muttered.

"I'm afraid there isn't," said Castleman. "They say there are stages you go through when you know you're going to die: disbelief, then anger, then self-pity, and finally acceptance. No one's ever come up with a similar list for the dementias, but in the end what you're going to have to do is accept it and learn to live with it."

"How long before I have to go to . . . to wherever I have to go when Paul can't care for me alone?"

Castleman took a deep breath, let it out, and pursed his lips. "It varies. It could be five or six months, it could be two years, it could be longer. A lot depends on you."

"On me?" said Gwendolyn.

"As you become more childlike, you will become more curious about things that you no longer know or recognize. Paul tells me you've always had a probing mind. Will you be content to sit in front of the television while he's sleeping or otherwise occupied, or will you feel a need to walk outside and then forget how to get back home? Will you be curious about all the buttons and switches on the kitchen appliances? Two-year-olds can't open doors or reach kitchen counters, but you will be able to. So, as I

say, it depends on you, and that is something no one can predict." He paused. "And there may be rages."

"Rages?" I repeated.

"In more than half the cases," he replied. "She won't know why she's so enraged. You will, of course—but you won't be able to do anything about it. If it happens, we have medications that will help."

I was so depressed I was thinking of suicide pacts, but Gwendolyn turned to me and said, "Well, Paul, it looks like we have a lot of living to cram into the next few months. I've always wanted to take a Caribbean cruise. We'll stop at the travel agency on the way home."

That was her reaction to the most horrific news a human being can receive.

I thanked God that I'd had sixty years with her, and I cursed Him for taking away everything that made her the woman I loved before we'd said and done all the things we had wanted to say and do.

She'd been beautiful once. She still was. Physical beauty fades, but inner beauty never does. For sixty years we had lived together, loved together, worked together, played together. We got to where we could finish each other's sentences, where we knew each other's tastes better than we knew our own. We had fights—who doesn't?—but we never once went to bed mad at each other.

We raised three children, two sons and a daughter. One son was killed in Vietnam; the other son and the daughter kept in touch as best they could, but they had their own lives to lead, and they lived many states away.

Gradually our outside social contacts became fewer and fewer; we were all each other needed. And now I was going to watch the only thing I'd ever truly loved become a little less each day, until there was nothing left but an empty shell.

The cruise went well. We even took the train all the way to the rum factory at the center of Jamaica, and we spent a few days in Miami before flying home. She seemed so normal, so absolutely herself, that I began thinking that maybe Dr. Castleman's diagnosis had been mistaken.

But then it began. There was no single incident that couldn't have occurred fifty years ago, nothing that you couldn't find a reasonable excuse for—but things kept happening. One afternoon she put a roast in the oven, and at dinnertime we found that she'd forgotten to turn the oven on. Two days later we were watching *The Maltese Falcon* for the umpteenth time, and suddenly she couldn't remember who killed Humphrey Bogart's partner. She "discovered" Raymond Chandler, an author she'd loved for years. There were no rages, but there was everything else Dr. Castleman had predicted.

I began counting her pills. She was on five different medications, three of them twice a day. She never skipped them all, but somehow the numbers never came out quite right.

I'd mention a person, a place, an incident, something we'd shared together, and one time out of three she couldn't recall it—and she'd get annoyed when I'd explain that she had forgotten it. In a month it became two out of three times. Then she lost interest in reading. She blamed it on

her glasses, but when I took her to get a new prescription, the optometrist tested her and told us that her vision hadn't changed since her last visit two years earlier.

She kept fighting it, trying to stimulate her brain with crossword puzzles, math problems, anything that would cause her to think. But each month the puzzles and problems got a little simpler, and each month she solved a few less than she had the month before. She still loved music, and she still loved leaving seeds out for the birds and watching them come by to feed—but she could no longer hum along with the melodies or identify the birds.

She had never allowed me to keep a gun in the house. It was better, she said, to let thieves steal everything than to get killed in a shootout—they were just possessions; *we* were all that counted—and I honored her wishes for sixty years. But now I went out and bought a small handgun and a box of bullets, and kept them locked in my desk against the day that she was so far gone she no longer knew who I was. I told myself that when that day occurred, I would put a bullet into her head and another into my own . . . but I knew that I couldn't. Myself, yes; the woman who'd been my life, never.

I met her in college. She was an honor student. I was a not-very-successful jock—third-string defensive end in football, back-up power forward in basketball, big, strong, and dumb—but she saw something in me. I'd noticed her around the campus—she was too good-looking not to notice—but she hung out with the brains, and our paths almost never crossed. The only reason I asked her out the first time was because one of my frat brothers bet me ten dollars she wouldn't give me the time of day. But for some reason I'll never know she said yes, and for the next sixty years I was never willingly out of her presence. When we had money we spent it, and when we didn't have money we were every bit as happy; we just didn't live as well or travel as much. We raised our kids, sent them out into the world, watched one die and two move away to begin their own lives, and wound up the way we'd started—just the two of us.

And now one of us was vanishing, day by day, minute by minute.

One morning she locked the bathroom door and couldn't remember how to unlock it. She was so panicky that she couldn't hear me giving her instructions from the other side. I was on the phone, calling the fire department, when she appeared at my side to ask why I was talking to them and what was burning.

"She had no memory of locking herself in," I explained to Dr. Castleman the next day. "One moment she couldn't cope with a lock any three-year-old could manipulate, and the next moment she opened the door and didn't remember having any problem with it."

"That's the way these things progress," he said.

"How long before she doesn't know me any more?"

Castleman sighed. "I really don't know, Paul. You've been the most important thing in her life, the most constant thing, so it stands to reason that you'll be the last thing she forgets." He sighed again. "It could be a few months, or a few years—or it could be tomorrow."

"It's not fair," I muttered.

"Nobody ever said it was," he replied. "I had her checked over while she was here, and for what it's worth she's in excellent physical health for a woman of her age. Heart and lungs are fine, blood pressure's normal."

Of course her blood pressure was normal, I thought bitterly. She didn't spend most of her waking hours wondering what it would be like when the person she had spent her life with no longer recognized her.

Then I realized that she didn't spend most of her waking hours thinking of *anything*, and I felt guilty for pitying myself when she was the one whose mind and memories were racing away at an ever-faster rate.

Two weeks later we went shopping for groceries. She wandered off to get something—ice cream, I think—and when I'd picked up what I needed and went over to the frozen food section she wasn't there. I looked around, checked out the next few aisles. No luck.

I asked one of the stock girls to check the women's rest room. It was empty.

I started getting a panicky feeling in the pit of my stomach. I was just about to go out into the parking lot to look for her when a cop brought her into the store, leading her very gently by the arm.

"She was wandering around looking for her car," he explained. "A 1961 Nash Rambler."

"We haven't owned that car in forty years or more," I said. I turned to Gwendolyn. "Are you all right?"

Her face was streaked by tears. "I'm sorry," she said. "I couldn't remember where we parked the car."

"It's all right," I said.

She kept crying and telling me how sorry she was. Pretty soon everyone was staring, and the store manager asked if I'd like to take her to his office and let her sit down. I thanked him and the cop, but decided she'd be better off at home, so I led her out to the Ford we'd owned for the past five years and drove her home.

As we pulled into the garage and got out of the car, she stood back and looked at it.

"What a pretty car," she said. "Whose is it?"

"They're not sure of anything," said Dr. Castleman. "But they *think* it's got something to do with the amyloid beta protein. An abundance of it can usually be found in people suffering from Alzheimer's or Down Syndrome."

"Can't you take it out, or do something to neutralize it?" I asked.

Gwendolyn sat in a chair, staring at the wall. We could have been ten thousand miles away as far as she was concerned.

"If it was that simple, they'd have done it."

"So it's a protein," I said. "Does it come in some kind of food? Is there something she shouldn't be eating?"

He shook his head. "There are all kinds of proteins. This is one you're born with."

"Is it in the brain?"

"Initially it's in the spinal fluid."

"Well, can't you drain it out?" I persisted.

He sighed. "By the time we know it's a problem in a particular individual, it's too late. It forms plaques on the brain, and once that happens, the disease is irreversible." He paused wearily. "At least it's irreversible today. Someday they'll cure it. They should be able to slow it down before too long. I wouldn't be surprised to see it eradicated within a quarter of a century. There may even come a day when they can test embryos for an amyloid beta imbalance and correct it *in utero*. They're making progress."

"But not in time to help Gwendolyn."

"No, not in time to help Gwendolyn."

Gradually, over the next few months, she became totally unaware that she even had Alzheimer's. She no longer read, but she watched the television incessantly. She especially liked children's shows and cartoons. I would come into the room and hear the eighty-two-year-old woman I loved singing along with the Mickey Mouse Club. I had a feeling that if they still ran test patterns she could watch one for hours on end.

And then came the morning I had known would come: I was fixing her breakfast—some cereal she'd seen advertised on television—and she looked up at me, and I could tell that she no longer knew who I was. Oh, she wasn't afraid of me, or even curious, but there was absolutely no spark of recognition.

The next day I moved her into a home that specialized in the senile dementias.

"I'm sorry, Paul," said Dr. Castleman. "But it really is for the best. She needs professional care. You've lost weight, you're not getting any sleep, and to be blunt, it no longer makes any difference to her who feeds and cleans and medicates her."

"Well, it makes a difference to *me*," I said angrily. "They treat her like an infant!"

"That's what she's become."

"She's been there two weeks, and I haven't seen them try—really try—to communicate with her."

"She has nothing to say, Paul."

"It's there," I said. "It's somewhere inside her brain."

"Her brain isn't what it once was," said Castleman. "You have to face up to that."

"I took her there too soon," I said. "There *must* be a way to connect with her."

"You're an adult, and despite her appearance, she's a four-year-old child," said Castleman gently. "You no longer have anything in common."

"We have a lifetime in common!" I snapped.

I couldn't listen to any more, so I got up and stalked out of his office.

I decided that depending on Dr. Castleman was a dead end, and I began visiting other specialists. They all told me pretty much the same thing. One of them even showed me his lab, where they were doing all kinds of chemical experiments on the amyloid beta protein and a number

of other things. It was encouraging, but nothing was going to happen fast enough to cure Gwendolyn.

Two or three times each day I picked up that pistol I'd bought and toyed with ending it, but I kept thinking: what if there's a miracle—medical, religious, whatever kind? What if she becomes Gwendolyn again? She'll be all alone with a bunch of senile old men and women, and I'll have deserted her.

So I couldn't kill myself, and I couldn't help her, and I couldn't just stand by and watch her. Somehow, somewhere, there *had* to be a way to connect with her, to communicate on the same level again. We'd faced some pretty terrible problems together—losing a son, suffering a miscarriage, watching each of our parents die in turn—and as long as we were together we were able to overcome them. This was just one more problem—and every problem is capable of solution.

I found the solution, too. It wasn't where I expected, and it certainly wasn't *what* I expected, but she was eighty-two years old and sinking fast, and I didn't hesitate.

That's where things stand this evening. Earlier today I bought this notebook, and this marks the end of my first entry.

Friday, June 22. I'd heard about the clinic while I was learning everything I could about the disease. The government outlawed it and shut it down, so they moved it lock, stock and barrel to Guatemala. It wasn't much to look at, but then, I wasn't expecting much. Just a miracle of a different sort.

They make no bones about what they anticipate if the experiment goes as planned. That's why they only accept terminal patients—and because they have so few and are so desperate for volunteers, that's also why they didn't challenge me when I told them I had a slow-acting cancer. I signed a release that probably wouldn't hold up in any court of law outside Guatemala; they now have my permission to do just about anything they want to me.

Saturday, June 23. So it begins. I thought they'd inject it into my spine, but instead they went through the carotid artery in my neck. Makes sense; it's the conduit between the spine and the brain. If anything's going to get the protein where it can do its work, that's the ticket. I thought it would hurt like hell, but it's just a little sore. Except for that, I don't feel any different.

Wednesday, June 27. Fourth day in a row of tedious lectures explaining how some of us will die but a few may be saved and all humanity will benefit, or something like that. Now I have an inkling of how lab rats and guinea pigs feel. They're not aware that they're dying; and I guess before too long, we won't be either.

Wednesday, July 3. After a week of having me play with the most idiotic puzzles, they tell me that I've lost 6 percent of my cognitive functions and that the condition is accelerating. It seems to please them no end. I'm not convinced; I think if they'd give me a little more time I'd do better on

these damned tests. I mean, it's been a long time since I was in school. I'm out of practice.

Sunday, July 7. You know, I think it's working. I was reading down in the lounge, and for the longest time I couldn't remember where my room was. Good. The faster it works, the better. I've got a lot of catching up to do.

Tuesday, July 16. Today we got another talking-to. They say the shots are stronger and the symptoms are appearing even faster than they'd hoped, and it's almost time to try the anecdote. Anecdote. Is that the right word?

Friday, July 26. Boy am I lucky. At the last minute I remembered why I went there in the first place. I waited until it was dark and snuck out. When I got to the airport I didn't have any money, but they asked to see my wallet and took out this plastic card and did something with it and said it was OK and gave me a ticket.

Saturday, July 27. I wrote down my address so I wouldn't forget, and boy am I lucky I did, because when I got a cab at the airport I couldn't remember what to tell him. We drove and we drove and finally I remembered I had wrote it down, but when we got home I didn't have a key. I started pounding on the door, but no one was there to let me in, and finally they came with a loud siren and took me somewhere else. I can't stay long. I have to find Gwendolyn before it is too late, but I can't remember what it would be too late for.

Mundy, August. He says his name is Doctor Kasleman and that I know him, and he kept saying to Paul why did you do this to yourself, and I told him I didn't remember but I know I had a reason and it had something to do with Gwendolyn. Do you remember her he said. Of course I do I said, she is my love and my life. I asked when can I see her & he said soon.

Wednesday. They gave me my own room, but I don't want my own room I want to be with Gwendolyn. Finally they let me see her and she was as beautiful as ever and I wanted to hug her and kiss her but when I walked up to her she started crying and the nurse took her away.

It has been 8 days since I wrote here. or maybe 9. I keep forgetting to. Today I saw a pretty little girl in the hall, with pretty white hair. She reminds me of someone but I don't know who. Tomorrow if I remember I will bring her a present.

I saw the pretty girl again today. I took a flower from a pot and gave it to her and she smiled and said thank you and we talked a lot and she said I am so glad we met & I am finally happy. I said so am I. I think we are going to be great friends because we like each other and have so much in common. I asked her name and she couldn't remember, so I will call her Gwendolyn. I think I know someone called Gwendolyn once a long time ago and it is a very pretty name for a very pretty new friend. ○

Michael Jasper has published over three dozen stories in *Asimov's*, *Strange Horizons*, *Writers of the Future*, the *Raleigh News & Observer*, *Strange New Worlds IV*, and other venues. His short story collection, *Gunning for the Buddha*, was released by Prime Books last October. Mr. Jasper lives with his wife Elizabeth in Raleigh, North Carolina. His co-author, Greg van Eekhout, has had stories in *Starlight 3*, *F&SF*, *Amazing*, and various other magazines and anthologies. He lives in Tempe, Arizona. The following is his first for *Asimov's*. In this collaborative effort, the authors explore the dark supernatural forces at large in . . .

CALIFORNIA KING

Michael Jasper

and

Greg van Eekhout

Our hero, a scrawny, bristle-haired man, softly sings a song he wrote when he was fifteen as he gives himself a new tattoo. He no longer remembers the verses, but the chorus goes something like: "Nyah-nyah, fuck-fuck, I'm the king, nyah-nyah, fuck-fuck." Even after all these years, he finds the hook sort of catchy. His raspy tenor smoothes and deepens as he embeds dozens of carefully spaced puncture wounds into his skinny right arm with his long, sharp knife, stealing the voice of the unconscious man upon whom he sits.

This will not be a big tattoo, we realize, for the real estate on our hero's right arm has become quite crowded. Someday soon, he'll have to move on to his unmarked left. As he rubs a hanky soaked with berry dye and coal

dust into the bloody dots, we watch a thin line of red trickle from the mouth of the motionless, waxy-skinned man beneath him. We see the scuffs and the ruined soles of our hero's black boots, so recently applied against the skull of the man under him. But what we cannot see is what his tattoo will be. At least not yet.

We call this man, our hero, the California King.

He is blond, of course, bleach-blond from the sun and surf, his hair standing in stiff tufts. Rail-thin and muscular as a whippet, our hero smiles with sharp white teeth as he rubs the dye into his self-inflicted wounds. He has finally caught his breath from his battle with the man under him.

We inch closer now to steal a glimpse of the tattoo-in-progress, and we are not surprised to see that the king has taken the greatest asset of his foe, who is better known as the Calling Man, and cut it into his arm in the shape of a mouth pursed into a treble-clef kiss. The Calling Man will never speak again, at least not to girls under eighteen who answer the phone while their mothers work second shift.

Around the king rises a world of ten-story apartment buildings, giant waffle-iron edifices surrounding a maze of clotheslines. Projects, they call them. And the king thinks of himself as a project, too, every step of which he's recorded in ink and scar tissue on his legs, his torso, his right arm.

He looks around. Whitey-tighties sag in the damp air. The California King has nothing against Oregon, or, for that matter, any parts north, east, or south of his homeland. But he misses his own deserts and beaches and slums and sparkly hillsides.

He leans over and reaches for his battered blue suitcase, sets it on his lap, and retrieves a roll of gauze. After wrapping a quick dressing around his arm, he puts away his dye and slips the knife in his belt sheath. Looking away and blinking his faded blue eyes at the big communal lawn stretching out in front of him, broken only by ugly red brick buildings, the king sighs.

Because his vision is better than perfect, better than 20-10—he drank a lot of organic carrot juice in his homeland—he is able to see what's *really* happening behind those TV-blued-out windows. He sees the pain and the sorrow of lives misspent here in the Burnside neighborhood of Portland.

The man underneath him starts to shift and move like too many books stacked in a sloping hallway when a trilling sound fills the air. At first, the king thinks it's the Calling Man's cell phone, but that can't be, as it's less a cell phone now than a loose collection of cell phone parts on the sidewalk next to them, and then he realizes it's his own phone.

"Fuck," he mutters, digging into his suitcase. He was hoping for an hour or two to wander around Powell's, read a couple of books in the aisles, maybe get a cup of coffee.

He finds his phone and hits TALK. We can only hope that the king doesn't slip away before we can buy him that coffee and at least offer him the shelter of our umbrella, because the chilly spring rains look like they're about to begin again.

But we know we can't interrupt him, this man, the king of California, with his unrelenting momentum. We step back to a safe distance, watching, and wishing the king well.

The voice on the phone is a cheese-grater rasp that usually comes from a seven-pack-a-day habit, which is kind of funny, because Jonah never smokes. Jonah never frequents restaurants with smoking sections. Jonah is so afraid of second-hand smoke that he hasn't left his apartment in seven years. He's not what you might call a man of action. For action, he uses the king.

"How's Oregon?" Jonah says.

"Lovely. I'll get you a postcard at the Greyhound station." Beneath him, his defeated opponent tries to roll over, and the king decides to get some distance from him before he wakes up entirely. He stands, grabs his suitcase, lets his skinny legs take him toward the playground on the other side of the common lawn. The merry-go-round spins, blown by bone-chilling wind. The hung-out laundry flaps in the cold, soaking up more moisture.

"Get me one with the volcano on it," Jonah says. "But first, there's something I need you to do."

The king bites his tongue. Someday he will have paid his debt in full to Jonah, and, on that day, he'll pay his boss a visit. He's not yet sure what he'll take from Jonah, but he knows it'll be something Jonah's sure to miss, like the Calling Man will miss his voice. Maybe he'll take a nice memory from Jonah's childhood and carve it into his left arm. Maybe *all* his nice memories.

But that will have to wait. For the time being, Jonah owns the king.

"I need you to go down to the Greyhound station. . . ."

"I just said that was where I'm going."

"I know. Don't interrupt. What I need you to do is, go down to the Greyhound station. There's a thing there. The thing is getting on a bus. . . ."

"Thing? There's a *thing*? Can you be a little more specific about this thing?" He keeps walking under the slate gray skies. He wishes someone would parole the sun.

"It's a thing," Jonah croaks. "You'll have to find it, and you'll have to determine what kind of thing it is. And, above all, don't let it come south. Keep it from the homelands. Do *not* let it cross the border into California!"

By Jonah's standards, these are painfully explicit instructions. One job, a couple of weeks back, all the king knew going in was that he needed to kill a hulking, dark green something-or-other. Turned out to be a necromantic construct in a Green Bay Packers jersey. His boss's scrying skills aren't what they used to be.

"This isn't a little job," Jonah says. "It's a *task*. One of the big ones. Understand? Frankly, I don't think you're up to it . . . but, well, you're all we've got."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," the king says. "Makes me feel all toasty inside." He thumbs END and the phone goes silent.

He turns back, and, in the distance, he sees the Calling Man lumber to

his feet like a wounded walrus, clutching his throat. The king smiles. Some justice has been done. A little bit.

But the communal lawn is still brown and patchy. And the pain behind the apartment windows hasn't diminished. And he can see a drug deal going down in the shadows between the buildings. And somewhere in a dirty bathroom, a fourteen-year-old girl is discovering she's pregnant.

But the king can't solve everybody's problems for them.

The king's got to gear up for a fight.

The king has got to move.

The bus station is a cinderblock box with booger-colored floor tiles. The hard, wire-mesh chairs in the waiting area are filled with people who can't afford to fly: some students with huge backpacks and guitar cases, young moms with dark circles under their eyes trying to keep their kids quiet or amused, bone-shrunken old ladies, paroled convicts.

"My people," the king whispers, his heart swelling with love. The sense of constantly being watched has diminished, and here the king feels himself click into place like a deadbolt securing a door.

He circles the interior of the station, prying into the eyes of all those inside it, yet nobody gives him a hint of any ill intentions. No "thing," as Jonah would call it.

Starting a second rotation of the crowded bus station, he doesn't see the little boy next to him until his boots catch on something small and he pulls back, overcompensating.

The king hits the ground and rolls, favoring his still-stinging right arm. His two daggers are out and in front of him before he can lift his gaze. When he does, he sees that he's been taken down by a tow-headed boy of barely four years in an orange *Elmo Loves Me* T-shirt. The knives disappear.

"Owie."

"Yeah, sorry about that, kid. But you tripped me."

"No," the kid insists, pointing. "Owie. On your arm."

"Tell me about it, kid," the king says, positioning himself so he's squatting with his back against the cool, phlegm-colored tiles of the station wall. "One day I'm gonna grow up and go to tattoo school."

"What's that one?" A finger the width of a crayon pokes the king's tripe, just above his freshly applied bandage.

The king sighs, still watching every green inch of the station. "Where's your mama, big guy?"

"No no no. What's *that* one?"

The king scans the bus station one final time, slowly, ignoring the grubby finger poking him. No sign of any sort of "thing." He gently, firmly pulls the kid's finger out of his arm.

"*That* one," he says, his voice softening the tiniest bit, "is a feather. I drew it after I saved ten kids like you from a bad woman who was trying to teach them to fly, down in Sacramento."

"Ladies don't fly," the kid says in an irritated voice.

"Neither do little kids, buddy."

The little boy's eyes are already searching for other objects carved into the king's arm. "What's *that*?"

"Owie. That's a cross. From a priest. I don't want to talk about that one anymore."

"What's *that*?"

"Listen—" the king hisses, but he is interrupted by a boarding call announcement, barely comprehensible coming as it does from the old, dusty speakers. The bus to the homeland is about to depart. He needs to leave, but he still hasn't found Jonah's "thing."

Unless . . .

"Kid? Where'd you say your mom was?"

"What's *that* one, Mister? Tell me."

No, the king thinks. Not this. No kids. Kids are off-limits. No matter what happens, the king will not hurt a kid, even if the kid grows six heads and spits venom. Not a kid.

Seven heads, though . . .

"This one?" The king looks down at his tattooed arm, where the blood from the musical mouth has soaked through the gauze. But the kid is pointing at something else. A pair of ballet slippers. "That's from someone I used to know. She sold her soul to the devil to make the monster dance, so she wouldn't have to anymore."

The kid pushes his finger into his arm, a tiny bit deeper.

"Do you know about making deals with the devil, kid? *Do* you?"

The little boy looks up at the king for the first time since tripping him. His eyes are wide as saucers, blue as Monterey Bay.

"You're a freaky cupcake, Mister."

The king is going for his knives when the kid says this. Then his hands relax, and he straightens. Innocent.

"Tell me about it," the king says, swallowing so hard his eyes water.

Damn you, Jonah, he thinks. Got me jumping at shadows. At *kids*.

The king tousles the boy's hair, and the boy looks at him frankly. "I'm going to go pee now."

"Bathroom's the best place for that," the king says, and he watches the boy skip away. Then the king slips out of the bus station and approaches an LA-bound bus. He enters the bus and walks unnoticed past the driver. All transports into his kingdom are free.

It was all a ruse, he decides, adjusting his daggers before he drops onto a seat at the back of the bus. Jonah's way of flexing his muscles. Just like sending the king up to damn Oregon for the day was a power play, all to do what? Steal the voice of some long-distance child-molester? Surely there were better things for the king of California to do than that.

Unless . . .

The king leans back against the musty-smelling seat. It will be good, he decides, to get Portland behind him. Then there's a smell of mothballs and cigarettes, and a man of nearly a dozen decades lowers himself interminably into the seat next to the king. His linen suit is the yellow of rancid butter.

"Seat's taken," the king mumbles, still staring out the window.

"Sure is," the old man says, voice soft like a hiccup. "Taken by me."

The king lifts his eyelids, which had somehow drifted shut on him, and turns his head. He blinks what feels like cigarette ash out of his eyes.

His new seatmate has already made himself at home. On his lap is a small black case filled with needles, a lighter, and a pair of spoons. The insides of the king's elbows itch with old hungers. His heart hammers. His mouth goes dry. The toothless old man smiles as he ties a rubber band around a skinny, yellowed arm.

"Want to get high?" he says, tapping the inside of his own elbow with a clawed pair of fingers.

The roar of the bus engine as they pull away from the Greyhound station drowns out any hope of an immediate answer.

"Good to see you again," the king says as soon as he is able. "Dad."

"Funny," says the old man.

The king doesn't really want to have a conversation with the old man, but he feels words forming on his lips, and he can't stop them. It's like falling. Once you start, hitting the ground is all you've got to look forward to.

"What's funny?" he says. And he winces. To ask information from a person is to give that person power. "What's funny, Dad?"

"I just think it's funny how I started you out with so many gifts, and you're still such a zero."

The king looks back out the window at the blur of trees and bruised skies. "That won't work," he says. "My self-esteem is just fine, and the ravings of my junkie father aren't likely to knock it down much."

"Illusion," the old man says.

Again, the sense of falling. The king looks away, at the other passengers, and glimpses what could be an orange Elmo T-shirt at the front of the bus. He just wants to get up and change his seat. Get away from the old man. But instead, he remains where he is.

"What's an illusion?" he asks, helplessly.

"Wrong question. Not *what*, but *how*. Look at me."

The king turns his head. There's no longer a rubber band around his father's arm. Now, it's just a blood pressure cuff. And the black box of spoons and needles is a cardboard tray from the bus station cafeteria, bearing a meatball sandwich. His father squeezes the bladder of the blood pressure cuff. *Foosh, foosh.*

"Illusion, see, is something you can't do. The tattoo thing, that's good. That's real clever. But there's so much more I could teach you."

Don't talk to him, the king silently urges himself. Don't open the wounds. Don't give the old man what he wants. But the words are going to spill out, there's no stopping it now, so he reshapes them.

"Hey, pops, your gonorrhea ever clear up?"

The old man reaches out, finger and thumb pinched together, and the king's head snaps back. A red burst of pain flares across his cheek.

Nobody else on the bus seems to notice. The other passengers just stare straight ahead. Tall pines flicker past the windows.

"Mind how you talk to your father," the old man says, mildly. "I'm here to help you."

The king rubs his cheek with one hand. The other moves closer to one of his knives. "I don't need your kind of help."

"But you so very much do," the old man says. "You have no idea what you're dealing with, Alex."

"Don't call me that."

"Why not? It's your name. I gave it to you. The night you were born, I took you out to meet the night. The star-filled skies spun like a great big turntable, and I lifted you high, and you scratched the sky like a record needle. When I heard the music you made, I gave you your name. Alexander, the name of a conqueror."

"And then you walked away," the king says. "You have no hold on me. You pawned your crown, and you smell like piss, and there's nothing I want from you, and nothing you can do for me. So, why don't you get the fuck lost before I tattoo your eyes on my arm?"

"Wake up, boy."

And the king does, snapping alert in a panic. How could he have fallen asleep? How long had he been out?

The old man's turtle-mouth curves in a smile. He leans his head back against the seat, his skin the color of lemonade.

"Look outside, Alex."

And the king does.

Outside the window is a dead land. The mountains are just mounds of charred dirt studded with blackened, skeletal trees. Ash falls like snow from the gray sky. And as far as the king can see—which, remember, is very, very far—rubber-stamp houses huddle like refugees, far into the distance. The houses aren't burned. They're just . . . dead. Every one of them is the same: cold and gray, with blank windows shut to the world.

"Ah, it's been too long," the old man says with a sigh. "California, here we are. It's good to be home."

We catch up to them, here, at the northern reaches of the king's homeland. The bus wasn't supposed to stop here—we have the schedule in our hands, and it says nothing about stopping at Ash City, CA, population none. Out of breath and gut-sore, we taste the burnt lives of what used to be a sunny row of houses, and we watch the door of the bus, waiting for our hero to emerge.

Waiting for the king to make his triumphant return home.

Soon the ash will turn to golden butterflies, probably, and the drab paint will fall from the houses like scales from a row of eyes. We wait, breathless, for the king. We hope.

There's a scrape of metal, and then the king is out one of the emergency window exits. Always with the grand entrances. And grand exits, we add, as he drops out of the bus onto the ashy ground with a soft thump.

He breathes from his mouth, his bright-white teeth whistling with the rush of air, in and out.

"How long have I been gone?" he whispers.

A rattle of bones and another soft thump mixed with something wet. The old man in the white suit has fallen from the bus, his knee crushing his meatball sandwich into the ash.

"Years," the old man wheezes. "You don't remember?"

We see the dead look creep into our hero's eyes as the reality of the barren kingdom settles into his soul. The crushed look on his face is reminiscent of a crumpled body that has finally met the earth after a long, long fall. We have seen such things, the sort of things people like you only see from the corner of your eyes. We see them head-on.

"I need to get back," the king says, even as he sinks to his knees in this desert of dust and ash. Dead gray matter from the ground puffs onto his green, sleeveless T-shirt. "Back to Culver City and the old neighborhood."

"Son, you *are* back."

The old man reaches for the king, but his hand never touches the king's unscarred left arm. With a series of hisses like air in a handful of syringes, the old man fades away into the ashy ground, and we wonder if he had ever been there in the first place.

"Your kingdom awaits," the old man's disembodied voice calls out, drifting over to us from our prescribed safe-viewing distance. "But your throne holds another's weight."

The instant the old man's last word is spoken, three seemingly unrelated events occur simultaneously.

Tucked into the hip pocket of the California King's jeans, the all-important cell phone begins to trill. A red and gold tattoo on the right arm of the California King bursts into flame. And, slicing northward like the trail of a scalpel, a black crack opens up underneath the feet of the California King.

In the arrhythmic heartbeat-instant that follows, we all sigh and hope that this time he stays here for good.

The king hits the ground hard, rolling away from the widening fissure, and he hears the sound of bones breaking. Big, giant bones, thick as sequoias. The flames on his arm go out, but not before turning his flesh into a red, bloody, blistering mess. He regains his feet and hits the TALK button on his phone.

"What?" he screams, feeling the earth sway beneath his feet.

"Nice going, fuck-up," says the voice on the other end. "You let the thing cross the border." It's Jonah.

"What *thing*? If you know what it is, you better fucking tell me, Jonah, or I swear on my mother's grave I'll tattoo your whole fucking life on my chest!"

There's a shrieking sound now, the biggest fingernails in the world scraping against the biggest chalkboard. The king gets the sense that it's coming from beneath him. That it's coming from the fissure.

"You *saw* the thing, dumb-ass," Jonah says. "You rode the *bus* with it! Hello, are you on drugs, or are you just stupid?"

The king closes his eyes. He wishes that he could blame it on drugs, but, no, this time stupidity is the culprit.

"Dad," he says.

"Your father, yes. Wasn't that obvious? He's been trying to reclaim his throne since you first banished him."

And now, a scrabbling sound, very close. Whatever's coming up from the fissure is almost here now.

"I banished him? Hey, I never banished anyone. *He left me.*"

"The new replaces the old," Jonah says, clearly exasperated. "It's the California way. Look, isn't there something better you could be doing with your time than picking at this father-son scab? The thing is almost arisen. You'll have to fight it unless you want the rest of the state turning to ash."

The king scans the dead city around him, and is surprised to see that there are, after all, residents here. He watches gray people taking out the trash, getting into gray cars, maybe heading off to work, or going shopping. Gray kids ride their skateboards. Every street terminates in a cul-de-sac. A polite word for a dead-end.

He won't let the rest of his realm be turned to this. He unsheathes one of his knives and has himself a good laugh over how pathetic it seems in the face of what's coming up from the earth.

"Got any tips for me, Jonah? A good cheat code or two?"

"Kid, just be the king," Jonah says, a trace of sympathy in his voice. "They're all rooting for you. Hopes and dreams of the people on your shoulders. All that shit. Just do your best." A pause. "Actually, do a little better than your best."

And the line goes dead.

The king pockets the phone and unsheathes his second knife. He squares his bony shoulders and faces the fissure. A hand emerges from it. Then another. They're yellow, gray-veined, blistered. His father's hands. He watches the old man pull himself from the cracked earth and rise to his feet.

Like gunfighters, they stare at one another, until the king says, "What the fuck are you looking at?"

"Wrong question," the old man says. "More relevant: What the fuck are you looking at?"

And suddenly the old man is no longer an old man. Now, he is decidedly a *thing*. He's a towering, mountainous thing, his flesh made of redwood tree bark with some gray patches of concrete slathered with graffiti. *Up in smoke*, his belly reads, in red and blue spray paint. His dome-head is topped with thick, white glacial ice, and ropes of kelp hang from his shoulders, dripping. Dying fish flop in the tangles. In his eyes dance glittering city lights, and, as he moves, the ground shudders beneath his feet. Yellow desert sand falls from his huge pierced dick.

And then he's just the old man again.

But when he speaks, he speaks with the voice of the king's entire kingdom. The ocean, the wind, the screaming of babies, the river-rush of freeway traffic, all of it. And this is what he says:

"You are overthrown," he says, and the babies' screams go silent.

"You are exiled," he says, and the whoosh of the freeway chokes and dies.

"You are *old*," he says, and the wind and the ocean fall silent.

The only way the king is able to keep his feet throughout the aural as-

sault of the thing that once was his father is through pure, genetic stubbornness. Though in his ears he feels the sharp tinnitus stab of an overcooked amp, knocking his equilibrium out of whack, the king only staggers back a total of three steps, one for each dire proclamation of the father thing.

Damaged eardrums and all, he can still hear his father's voice, repeating his mantra: overthrown, exiled, old.

The king's knives lift up, flashing in the dull light of this dead suburb. The needle tips of the blades point at his father, who has begun to shimmer in front of him. The creature who was once his father is having trouble maintaining his human shape for more than a few seconds at a time. One second the knives are pointing at the chicken neck of an old man, the next second they're aimed at the chunk of concrete growing out of the thing's redwood belly.

"Up in smoke," the king mutters, though all he hears is his own blood in his ears.

He hopes dear old Dad has heard him. If not, he decides, he can let his knives finish the conversation for him.

The shifting between man and thing speeds up until the two beings become indistinguishable. Foul-smelling ash fills the air, blinding the king momentarily.

Damn it all, he thinks. Deaf and now blind. I truly suck in a fight now.

When his eyes clear, instead of the redwood and concrete beast he's expecting, the king is face to face with his ancient father once again.

Playing with me, the king realizes. Yanking me around like he used to when I was five and pissing in my pants to see him on the one or two days a year he'd drop by our shitty apartment.

No more.

The king drops his knives into the ash, where they stick and quiver. The old man doesn't deserve that clean a death. The king wants to feel his hands on the old man's flesh as the bastard takes his last breath.

"Come on," the king says, though he can only hear his words faintly through his abused eardrums. "I don't know what sort of deal you made while you were away all these years, but I'm sure you and Jonah have had this day planned for a while. So come on, Dad. Let's do our Luke and Vader scene right now."

His father only smiles. He's frail, a walking skeleton held together by yellow skin and stubborn sinew. He shakes his head like a teacher disappointed by an underachieving student.

"Oh no, son, it's not like that at all." The king is able to hear the old man clearly now, despite the rush of blood inside his head. "You slept for too, too long. You allowed your attention to wander, and you forgot the needs of your kingdom. I mean, really, look at the state of things—urban sprawl, poisoned air, drive-by shootings, reality television? Now, tell me, my boy. What king allows something like that to happen to his homeland?"

As his father talks, the king slaps at a sudden throbbing on his arm. He takes a furtive glance down at his collection of inked scars and tats, and squints at the place where the oldest of his etchings once resided. Safety

pins and India ink. He didn't know what he was doing back then, and it's been so long, he can't remember what that tattoo once was.

All that remains is a pink and black blister, a burnt carbon and cotton-candy colored design that makes him think of afterbirth. Of new life created through an instant of suffering. But that's impossible.

Unless . . .

"No," the California King says, his plea falling silent and toneless inside his swirling head.

"That's right," the old man says. He nods his bald head at something behind the king, as if acknowledging a long-awaited delivery.

It takes all of his energy to turn, but after what feels like years, the California King is able to see what—who—the old man is looking at.

"Welcome home," a tiny voice says to the king. In an orange *Elmo Loves Me* T-shirt, he's a tow-headed boy of barely four years. He looks up at the king with eyes like mirrors.

The king wants badly to pick up his knives, but his brain and his body are no longer on speaking terms. With a tardy flash of insight, he recalls what the melted tattoo was, his first ever creation: a tiny gold crown, encrusted with blood rubies.

"Now, I'm gonna have to ask you to leave," the boy continues, and then pauses for a painful, dramatic, and—dare we say it?—pregnant second before delivering the knockout punch: "Got that, Dad?"

Indeed, the king gets it. Head in his hands, he assumes a lotus position upon the cracked earth.

Jonah's been jerking him around for months on end while he prepared his own horse—the king's son—for the crown. He kept the boy outside California to avoid undue notice, and then, when the time was right, he sent the king up to Oregon to retrieve the boy. Jonah's pretty smart. He used the old man as a distraction, and tricked the king into escorting the boy, the king's own rival, across the border to his kingdom.

The California King has to hand it to Jonah. This is simply what he deserves for trying to play poker with one of the old East Coast kings.

He lifts his head and finds himself staring into the chillingly blank gaze of his son. Then he turns to his own father.

"And what do *you* get out of this? When the kid becomes king, you're no better off than when I took the job."

"That's not true," the old man says. "Enmity skips generations. We're gonna be best buddies, your boy and me."

It would comfort the king to think that the old man is lying, that he'll abandon his grandson just as easily as he did his son. But there's a ring of truth in the old man's words. The old man might even come to genuinely love the boy, as grandfathers are wont to do.

And then *he'd* be the one training the new king.

Training him in his own image.

The king rises to his weary legs. He dusts off the knees of his jeans and runs a hand through his hair.

"Okay," he says with a sigh. "What are we waiting for?"

"We're waiting for you to leave," the boy says.

"But I'm not going."

The old man *tsks* and wags his gnarled index finger. "There can only be one king, Alex. You took my crown, and now it's time to pass it on to the boy. Unless," the old man says, "you're planning on murdering your own son."

"Nope. He's king now. Simple as that. The king is tired, long live the king, nyah-nyah, fuck-fuck." Alex bows to his son. "But I'm not leaving."

The boy shrugs, already a dead-panning cynic at the age of four. "Then I'll have to kill you."

"I know," Alex says. "But that'll have to wait till you're big enough to reach the grown-up urinal. When your granddad figured I was big enough to take him out—around when I turned six—he jumped ship and left me to fend for myself. But you and me, we're going to do things a little differently."

"What are you talking about?" says the old man. There's concern—even fear—in his yellow billiard-ball eyes.

"I'm not leaving my son," Alex says. He inhales dust and then everything comes clear for him, clearer than anything has been in years.

"No," he says. "I'm gonna Tom Joad this boy. Wherever a bunch of cops are beating the crap out of a black guy, I'll be there. Wherever a coyote is leaving a bunch of illegals for dead in the desert, I'll be there. And I'll be there with my son, the king, and I'll be trying to help him fix it. Most of the time, we probably won't make anything better. Not a lot a king can do sometimes. But, hey, into the mosh, no matter what happens. Right, son?"

The boy wipes his nose on the collar of his Elmo T-shirt. "When I get big enough, I'm going to kill you."

"Chip off the old block," Alex says. "But first, Highness, we're left with a bit of unfinished business."

He turns to face the old man.

We are all here, watching. We gather around, ash on our clothes and wonder in our eyes. The big showdown, at last. We hold our collective breaths, amazed to be witnessing three generations of California Kings gathered here on this day. Decades of bad blood in the air, thick enough to chew.

Our hero turns his back on his boy—who knew? we keep asking each other, who knew the king had a son?—and walks between his pair of knives, which are still poking out of the ash-ridden ground.

The old man backs up a step, though we can tell he doesn't want to do it. It's an ancient fear: the son rising up to smite the father.

The old man speaks first. "Who's going to stop me from killing you both?"

"Not me." Our hero's voice is so soft we must lean closer to hear it. "I won't raise a finger against you, Dad."

"Then heed me! Or I swear, I will kill you." The old man lifts bony arms as if trying to shift into his demon's body again, but all he can manage now is a piece of kelp dangling from one hairy ear.

"You didn't let me *finish*, damn it." Alex covers his son's ears an instant

too late. The boy pulls away from him at first, then inches closer. "I won't fight you, Dad. I'm through with windmill-tilting. Tell Jonah that for me, if you like. No, I'm taking my boy on a walking tour of his kingdom. And they won't let you touch us."

The old man bursts into nervous laughter. "Who's this 'they'? We're the only ones here, zero." He lowers his arms and kicks at the ash on the ground. "You've spent too much time in the sun, using dirty knives to cut tattoos into your arm. There's nobody to help you and my king. You've got to fight me. Kill me, if you can."

And then the bottom drops out.

Our hero, our king—we can't bring ourselves to call him "Alex"—paces in a slow, slow circle. As he turns, he points at each and every one of us. It takes him a good minute to do so, and in that time, everything we have ever known changes.

"I think these fine folks gathered here would beg to differ."

No, we want to scream. We did as we'd been told. We'd kept the safe, prescribed viewing-distances. We'd followed him, yes, we admit that, but only after ensuring he was far enough ahead of us. He never should have known we were here.

"My fan club," our king says. His face lights up now, as if overjoyed at finally getting to share this secret at last. He laughs loud enough to shake the earth.

Caught, we can do only one thing. We move closer, as one.

The king, our king, looks at his father. "You're going to have to deal with them on your own, Dad."

We move even closer now to the three kings of California. Our eyes slip past our hero and focus on the old man, a faded king who ruled a different kingdom, in a different age.

We all sigh and know that this time, it is up to us whether our hero stays here for good.

We fall upon the oldest of the kings and cover him like a hot desert wind.

I take my boy's hand. It's slightly sticky with a mix of old chocolate and sweat, but its grip is strong. I never should have left him and his mother those four years ago. But back then my kingdom was large and new to me, and the highways beckoned, and back then, I believed that one little duplex on the shit-end of Culver City did not a kingly castle make.

I lead him away from the screams behind us. We pass by my knives, and I think about plucking them from the ground and starting a new tattoo on my left arm. But I leave them and give my son a sidelong look instead.

The new king is otherwise preoccupied. With eyes open wide, he looks at the glorious expanse of his kingdom unfurling in front of us. Already the ash is beginning to shift as tufts of grass force their way to the surface.

"Which way," I whisper, "my king?"

He answers with only a finger pointing south. Still pointing, he squeezes my hand tighter, and we start to walk. ○

THE TINKERS OF IRELAND

It was the famine that forced the tinkers
From the land and set their feet forever to the road.
That is if they were not wanderers from the first,
Never stopping for more than the breath it takes
To steal hubcaps, luggage, or love.
Whatever it was, some wild great hunger drove
Them on, first in horsecarts and then in motor homes,
And always some of their vehicles are left behind
As if the journey grew too tame for them and they
Walked off into the green sea mist that blurs the shore's
Edge, that place of spume and prism and the glistening
Tracks of gypsy stars. They were always dangerous
To mortals, like the scales of a mermaid caught
In the moon's deluge of silver or the singing of some
Impossible ocean flute, calling us to come away,
Away and see the sky up close, washed by the mirroring
Waves. No wonder impressionable girls and boys
Go wandering into love and die of longings
Too big for the lives to be had in one small space
More fixed than the North Star, which can never bathe
In the sea but, at least, circles it endlessly.
So now, no doubt, the tinkers have gone on *
Up the sky and out, in ragtag ships to Altair, *
Aldeberan, and Orion, still enticing the rest *
Of us to follow and find that dream which even *
Love can't hold. And some of them, of course, *
Leave their space junk behind in perpetual *
Orbit, abandoned, when they travel suddenly *
To still stranger lands. * * *

—Ace G. Pilkington

* * *

BEAN THERE

Jack Skillingstead

A previous story by Jack Skillingstead, "Dead Worlds" (June 2003), was a finalist for the Sturgeon award.

Of his latest tale Jack says, "This is a true story, especially the parts that didn't get written down."

I fell flat on my ass, stunned, jaw unhinged, gaping at the thing. Implications piled up fast. My gaze wandered briefly off the marble block, then I fell again. *Inside*, this time, as my interior order shifted—irrevocably, perhaps. It was a light-bulb moment, and, cravenly, I wished I could pull a chain and turn it off. Thanks a lot, Aimee. Happy Anniversary. I sat on the floor and it sat on the wheeled mover's cart, note still taped to the side facing me, a sheet of printer paper with red Sharpie lettering three inches high: THIS IS YOURS, BURT. MY MIGHTY MAN!

Go back two months. Pick a Tuesday in May. A nice spring morning. There might have been birds twittering happily, the way they do. I had the front door of Bean There propped open, plus all the windows on the sidewalk side. Seven AM of a twittering fine morning.

Aimee said, "Wow!"

"Wow what?" Slanting sunlight had discovered beaches of dust on the round table tops, and I was wiping them down ahead of the Clamoring Horde.

"A kid in Ashland levitated his bike," Aimee said. "Can you believe it?"

"No."

"Grouch."

"I'm always grouchy before coffee."

She snorted—but charmingly, not like a warthog or anything. "By my count, you've already had a cappuccino and two Americanos. You ought to save some for the paying customers."

It was my turn to snort. "Paying customers? Are you trying to be funny? Besides, I meant before I *sell* any coffee."

She hmmm-ed, her attention riveted back on the laptop. She hunched over it, elbows planted on the counter, fingers pronged in her pixie hair, the pert little behind that had launched a thousand or so of my ships aimed in my direction on the black vinyl swivel stool.

"Come on," I said. "Nobody's levitated anything. Not even in Assland."

"Ass-land?" She smirked over her shoulder.

"Ashland. Ashland. What are you reading, anyway? The *Weekly World News*?"

"Reuters."

At which moment The Clamoring Horde entered Bean There. He was wearing a blue button-down shirt, crisp khakis, and brown loafers, accessorized with a briefcase and gold earring.

"Double-tall-two-percent," he said.

Aimee got behind the bar and pulled it. I took her place on the stool and scrolled through the Reuters story. In front of witnesses, adorable Samuel Welch, aged nine, had purportedly swept his BMX bike into the high altitudes of a neighbor's poplar. Never mind that one of the witnesses was an off-duty state patrol officer, six months ago this story *would* have been relegated to the pseudo-news. But with the Harbingers among us, anything, any damned thing at all, had seemed to become possible, if not explicable.

Aimee kept glancing in my direction, so I tried not to look too interested in the story.

"It's happening," she said, sing-songy, on her way to the freshly de-beached table where the C.H. had seated himself.

"Don't get crazy on me," I sing-songed back. I'd had crazy in my life, plenty of it. An alcoholic father and a bipolar sister. Dad had been a maintenance drinker, and not a mean one. But even a happy drunk is still a drunk, and if you live with one, especially if he's your parent, you'd better gird yourself for two levels of life. The level that occurs on the surface and that everyone sees, which is the presentation level—and the private level that occurs mostly behind closed doors and makes you feel like the world is a wobbly and uncertain place. I was fourteen when a stroke killed my mom, and Dad tumbled over the line into a realm of sodden self-pity and violent outbursts. At this point, toss in the bipolar sister, the older sister who up till then, had been your rock of stability, and see where *that* gets you. Lori began to see the world in a very different way, and was vocal about it, veering toward the occult and a perspective two shades to the left of sane.

Yeah, I knew crazy.

Guys like me grow up obsessed with "normalcy" and order. Or we grow up to be little chaos-mavens ourselves. As a kid, I watched TV obsessively. It was my escape hatch. I liked Disney, especially the old black-and-white footage they sometimes showed of the early days. That was a world *in order*, and Uncle Walt was like a cool Mr. Rogers. To me he was, anyway. When I grew up, I found another safe obsession in my java joint, Bean There. Later, for balance, I found Aimee (though she wasn't as safe emotionally as a coffee bar). Then the Harbingers arrived.

"You call it crazy," Aimee said. "I call it Evolution."

With a capital E. The famous newsclip seen around the world. The aliens arrived neither as an invading force nor as beneficent galactic pals. By their own description, they were "Harbingers."

Famous network interviewer: "Harbingers of what?"

Alien: "Evolution."

Speaking of trees, the aliens somewhat resembled gnarled and rootless specimens. Those viewers who had devoted their attention to the minute analysis of *The Clip* liked to assert that after uttering the word "Evolution," the alien had smiled an enigmatic and very zenish smile. Of course, the Harbingers mostly communicated telepathically, and there was even debate as to whether they *had* mouths. I guess you could point to the wartish seam midway up the trunk that constantly oozed some kind of thick sap and call *that* a mouth.

Evolution. Capital E.

It had become a movement. Aimee even had one of the ubiquitous "E" T-shirts—not the Ralph Lauren version, though.

"Seriously," she said, laying her arm across my shoulders. "There're stories like that almost every day. You *can't* deny it."

"Look, I'm just a humble businessman in a business that's gotten too humble."

"Burt—

"Yes?"

"Oh, never mind."

The C.H. finished his latte, folded his *Wall Street Journal* neatly, and replaced it in his briefcase.

"The stories are all bunk," he said, smartly snapping chrome latches and standing up. He was a little flushed around the hairline. "And if you ask *me*, there aren't any aliens, either. It's just some kind of—"

"Some kind of. . . ?" Aimee said.

"Mass hallucination, whatever."

It was true that some people claimed they were unable to quite . . . see . . . the aliens. Most notably the senior senator from Ohio. Who could forget his famous "smoke and mirrors" press conference? And everybody commented on the soap-bubble quality of their ships.

"In my opinion," the C.H. said, "everybody has to get back to normal before it's too late."

And then he went out among the twittered, and it was almost an hour before the next customer wandered in.

"People are scared," I said at the other end of the day, standing in boxers by the window of my apartment, only a couple of blocks from my rapidly drowning venture.

"Some people are," Aimee said. "Are you?"

"It wouldn't be manly to admit it," I said. "Besides, I'm not, really."

She moved—a silky whisper of girlflesh and sheets. She didn't say anything, and I felt compelled to fill in the gap. Somehow, Aimee and I had lost the comfort of easy silences.

"The fear thing, that's just my pet theory. Remember at first there was an uptick in business? People wanted to talk, gather, bond."

"Have a cup o' joe," Aimee said.

"Right. But now they're, I don't know, hunkered down. You can only take so much weirdness before you have to shut it off."

"Not *everyone* has to shut it off," Aimee said. "Maybe some of those hun-
gering people are busy."

I turned from the window. Aimee was looking at the ceiling, fingers laced behind her head, the sheet about her waist and her breasts so lovely.

"Busy doing *what?*" I said.

"Evolving."

I had to ask.

We weren't married, but we had anniversaries. One arrived in the midst of the consummate weirdness. That pervasive sense of unreality plus the fact that I was furiously dog-paddling in a sea of red ink had conspired to short-circuit my memory.

"Happy anniversary," Aimee said on the phone.

"Oh, shit."

"Sweet-talker."

"Aim, I'm really sorry."

"You can make it up to me."

"Anything."

"Come over now."

She had borrowed a friend's little Toyota pickup. Aimee's apartment building, which was old and consisted of only twelve units, provided each tenant with his or her own mini-garage so narrow and shallow they were really car boxes, with barely enough room to open the driver's door. Which didn't matter to Aimee, since she didn't own a vehicle and used her car box for storage.

The door was up and the interior space had been cleaned out. Presumably to make room for the thing in the back of the yellow Toyota.

A block of white marble. That pickup was riding so low on its springs that it was a wonder the rear wheels could turn.

"Isn't it beautiful!" Aimee said.

"Very pretty. Paperweight?"

"I'm going to sculpt it, silly!" She was beaming.

"Cool."

"Your skepticism does *not* affect me."

"I'm not being skeptical. But don't you think it might be easier to start with something less intimidating, not to mention cheaper, like clay?"

"I am not in the least bit intimidated. And I got a great deal at The Quarry Werks. Kind of an installment plan. They didn't seem to care. Everybody's so spaced-out."

The block was three feet on a side and weighed approximately twenty-seven million pounds. A couple of guys from Aimee's building helped us muscle it around. Transferring the thing from the Toyota's tailgate (dangerous *skreek* of hinges) to the mover's cart threatened to give us all hernias. Even pushing it into the garage was not easy. Once it started rolling, okay. But getting it started was murder. We three he-men bent at the knees, put our shoulders into it, and made like Sisyphean triplets.

Aimee was like one of those dilettantes I imagine must inhabit old French novels. During our three-year relationship, she had "been" a painter, a writer, a juggler, and a chef. Brief enthusiasms that burned bright then dimmed to forgotten clinkers. When I met her she was waiting tables for a living. We hit it off and I hired her to help me with Bean

There. After that, one thing led to the inevitable other and we became much more than partners in caffeine. At thirty-two, this was the longest relationship I'd ever managed.

When the other guys left, I wiped the sweat out of my eyes and asked, "What put you onto sculpting, anyway?"

"It's funny," Aimee said. "I had a dream about it, and when I woke up, I thought, Why not? But that isn't the funny part. The funny part is that I hadn't been asleep, I just *thought* I was."

She hugged me and kissed my mouth. "You're my mighty man," she said.

"Mighty Man could use a cold beer."

"Come up to my lair, then."

I did, but not for beer.

News clippings taped to the wall of Aimee's garage/sculptor's studio:

From the Associated Press, originally reported in the *Memphis Herald Tribune*, June 15, 2007. *Tupelo Woman Teleports*: Candace McCoy, a forty-six-year-old housewife from Tupelo, paid an unusual visit to Elvis Presley's Graceland mansion yesterday when she unaccountably materialized in the "Jungle Room" before an eyewitness, security guard Joseph Lytel. Says Lytel, "The air got kind of dark and ripply, then she sort of stepped through." Mrs. McCoy, who appeared in a state of shock and was transported to Mercy Hospital, kept saying, "I just love Elvis. . . ."

From Reuters, June 17, 2007. *Astronaut Claims Moon Walk, Thirty Years Late*: Former *Apollo 13* Commander James Lovell today announced that he had at long last walked upon the surface of the moon. Lovell, seventy-nine, said that he had not required any life-sustaining equipment and that his mode of transport was ". . . nothing more complicated than the simple desire to be there." As evidence, Commander Lovell offered his bedroom slippers, the bottoms of which were caked with a gray talc-like powder. Speaking on condition of anonymity, a source at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Houston, Texas confirmed that the powder is indeed moon dust, though there is no official word on that conclusion. Lovell, appearing on the front lawn of his Palm Springs home in a white T-shirt with a large black letter "E" on the front, described his journey as an "Evolutionary" experience, apparently referring to the enigmatic statement of the Harbingers. "The view from Fra Mauro was transcendental," said Lovell.

From the Associated Press: *Dead Man Singing*. Jerry Garcia performed "live" for the first time since his death in 1994. Tom Petty, performing at Washington State's Gorge amphitheater, announced a "special guest." Garcia then ambled onto the stage wearing a tie-dyed "E" T-shirt and an acoustic guitar. There were cheers, but also some screams from those closest to the stage, and at least three concertgoers fainted and required medical attention.

I was sleeping over at Aimee's, and woke up, terrified. It must have been a nightmare, I don't know. The Madrona outside her bedroom window cast a pale shadow over the bed, and I thought of the Harbingers, the

hideous physicality of them. It was two o'clock in the morning. Aim was not in the bed.

I pulled on a pair of jeans and didn't bother tying my shoes. The door of the garage was raised about a quarter way for air. Bright light spilled out. I ducked under the partially raised door. Hot halogen lamps on tripod stands illuminated the marble block. Aim's face glowed with a sheen of sweat.

"Burt!"

"I had a bad dream, or something."

"Poor baby. Well, *I've* had a breakthrough."

"Good."

"It's the tools."

"What about them?"

"I was using the wrong ones. Look at this."

She meant the block. I looked. To my eye it appeared pretty much the same as it had the day we off-loaded it from the pickup truck, though I could tell she had hacked at it a little. A few fragments of marble lay scattered around the stool, and the face of the block had been scarred in a minor way.

"Look *through* it," she said.

"I can't look through it, for Christ's sake, Aim!"

"But you can," she said. "It's like anything else. Really. I mean, it's even like boxing."

"What?"

"Sure. Same mental thing, in a way. Like you throw the punch *through*, as if the jaw wasn't even *there*. And it's not. Neither's the marble. I mean it's there, of course. But also it's *not* there. And if it's *not*, well, then you can throw your punches right on through. You can do anything. *Anything*."

"Aimee, come on."

"Don't be afraid."

"I'm *not* afraid."

"Honey." She got up and came to me and hugged me. "It's all right."

I fought it, but the moat around my heart filled with tears and I sobbed into Aimee's hair, "I want everything to be normal again."

"Darling, I know. It's okay, it really is."

But it wasn't. The rational world tilted, threatening chaos, and my anchor was talking phantom punches.

"It's accelerated evolution," she said, excited. "You know, all the little grays, and the crop circles and UFO's and synchronicity and déjà vu, just *all* of it—those things are projections, the evolutionary psyche of human potential manifesting in consort with the conscious Universe. Do you see? Oh, I'm not saying it right. But listen. You didn't think real aliens looked like *X-Files* puppets, did you?" She laughed. "The Harbingers are *real*. All the stuff happening now is *real*. It's to get us going before it's too late, to get as many of us going as possible. Before we completely fuck over the planet and the whole human race."

We were still holding each other, but now it was like we were two separate people and it didn't matter that I had been inside of her countless

times and we had spoken every living shred of our lives to each other. She was just somebody I was holding. In her excited voice, I heard my sister's delusional rantings while Dad hunted drunkenly for his car keys.

"Don't, Burt," Aimee said. "you're going away. Please don't do that. You could be so close, if you wanted to be."

I continued holding her, but the good between us was gone and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it. I don't think I was afraid. I don't know that fear had anything to do with it.

"It's like being shut up in a little room," Aimee said. "A room with no windows and a closed door. And it's fine, because you don't know you're in a little room, you think you're in the middle of the world. But what if you *knew*? What if all of a sudden there *was* a window and you could *see* that there was a universe of marvels right outside, and all you had to do was open the door, because it's not locked or anything. It's just a door, waiting for the person in the room to wake up enough to open it."

All this while, she looked earnestly into my face, her eyes shining.

I said, "Aim, I am so tired."

Most people weren't onboard for the Evolution, and things got pretty bad. The End Is Nigh contingent. Economic collapse. Suicides, lots of suicides. By July, I had given up opening Bean There. I just wanted to sleep, perchance not to dream.

Then reality snapped back, and I woke one morning with some kind of hangover and—unknown to me at the time—all my recent memory furniture drastically re-arranged. Harbingers? Never heard of 'em.

The natural response to hangover is aspirin and coffee. I dressed, grabbed my keys, and strolled down to Bean There to open the doors, only vaguely recalling that hard times and some kind of throbbing apathy had compelled me to close the place for a few days.

Open it and they will come. I guess I wasn't the only one with a hangover. I worked my ass off that first day, riding a caffeine bullet train to stay *focused*. Aimee was not around, and I sorely missed her. What in hell had we been fighting about, anyway? I closed up at seven, after a nice, relaxing twelve-hour day. My CLOSED sign depicted a sad little coffee cup with wavy steam hair.

I got on my cell and called Aimee, because whatever we'd been fighting about wasn't worth it. Dimly, I seemed to recall some kind of tiff over her latest artistic indulgence. She picked up on the second ring.

"May I speak with Ms. Rodin, please?"

"Funny guy."

"Aim, I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I, ah, dunno."

She laughed, sounding extra perky and normal and non-pissed-off.

"So how's it going?" I said. "If I come over will you lure me upstairs with promises of showing me your erotic statues?"

"You've got the only erotic stonework I'm interested in, mister."

"I am so *there*."

* * *

And later, during a wine-and-underwear moment in her kitchenette, I said:

"I could really use you at Bean There tomorrow."

Teasing: "Like you used me today?"

"With variations, only not as slippery, and you'll have to pull espressos, too. Aim, business is picking up in a major way. I can't even believe I closed down for a while. I must have been nuts!"

She was quiet a while and easy within herself. I was the one with jitters all of a sudden. On the way over, it had occurred to me that I wanted to marry Aimee, that I'd always wanted to. It was nothing other than fear that had kept us in separate apartments, that had allowed our lives to intersect in work and love-making, but not in the long sweet haul of committed love itself. My fear, not hers; Aimee was fearless in all things.

So I'd jacked myself up to ask her, but before I could get the words out, she dropped a safe on my head.

"Burt, I think I'm going to do some traveling, see some things, maybe do a little good in the world."

"You're joining the Peace Corps?" I didn't know what she was talking about, and I struggled to keep the irritation out of my voice.

"No, silly. More of a private thing."

"I thought we were partners." I couldn't even mention the marriage thing. Suddenly, it wasn't irritation I felt. My throat tightened down with emotion.

"We could still be pards," she said, taking my hand. "But you'd have to be unafraid to come with me, Burt."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Where are you going, really?"

"Burt, what if there was no Time or Space, and if you wanted to be somewhere, wherever and whenever, you could just *be* there? What would you pick, what would make you feel safe and happy?"

It wasn't what she said exactly, it was some upheaval within myself. I wanted to cry but didn't.

"Does opening day at Disneyland count?" I said, thinking I was being sarcastic.

She laughed. "Sure."

"Okay, I pick that. Now can we talk sense?"

"Won't there be a lot of people?" she said.

"Yeah, but it's the happiest place on Earth, so they'd all be *happy*, right? Aim, come on. Don't go. Please."

"I'm sorry, Burt."

She hugged me, and I wanted to melt into her, but that wasn't happening.

"I finished my sculpture," she said. "I want to give it to you."

"Going-away present? Thanks."

"Shush. Nobody goes anywhere, not really. I love you. Let's call it an anniversary present, okay?"

"Sure, okay."

"Don't be sad."

She had to be kidding with that one.

* * *

I called the next day, but she didn't answer. After I hung the CLOSED sign out, I walked over to her apartment. A white envelope with my name printed on it was taped to the outside of her door. I ripped the envelope open, but all the note said was "Don't forget your present. Love, Aimee."

That damn rock.

The garage was completely bare except for the marble block pushed into the corner on its rolling cart. The air smelled dry and the cement walls held the heat in. The last of the evening sunlight fell short of the block, which, in shadow at least, appeared as unworked and raw as the last time I'd seen it, its blunt face only slightly scarred by Aimee's amateur chiseling.

A sheet of printer paper was taped to the block. The sheet had been written upon, but I couldn't decipher it from where I stood. And I didn't want to get any closer. I just didn't.

The daylight terminator crept across the oil-stained floor, almost to the toes of my shoes before I imagined Aimee whispering *Don't be afraid*.

But I was afraid.

Nevertheless, I took a tentative shuffling step into the shadow, then another, and then I was close enough to read the paper. THIS IS YOURS, BURT: MY MIGHTY MAN! And something about Aim's familiar jokey intimacy took the hex off and impelled me forward.

Close up, Aimee's sculpture was as artless as any random hunk of stone you might happen to stumble upon. Wondering if there was something chiseled into the side facing the wall, I bent my back and braced my feet to pull it around—and instead fell flat on my ass.

Because the thing on that cart weighed no more than a basket of feathers. It kept rolling around after I fell, and stopped with the sheet of paper facing me again.

I sat stunned for a while, then turned my hands up and looked at them. White eggshell-like flakes clung to the sweat on my fingers. I crawled over to the block and reached out with the spread fingers of my right hand. The outer shell of the sculpture fell away with an airy crackle where I touched it.

I brushed my trembling hands over the block like a palsied conjuror, and it collapsed in an avalanche of rice paper-thin marble flakes, as if it had been held together by nothing more substantial than a hopeful thought.

What remained was something like a Christmas ornament. One fashioned from and held up by polished marble nets of filamentous intricacy, as if spider-spun. Aimee had created this wonder *inside* the block.

Which was impossible.

An impossible artifact from that newly forgotten world of teleporting housewives and stumpy, non-deciduous aliens, of Evolutionary human consciousness. Capital E. Bleh.

A worm uncoiled in my stomach. The room seemed to sway, and I had nothing to hold onto. Kneeling on the hard cement, my hands clenching, a singlet of sweat oozed out of my body. The object before me was a memory ornament, intended to remind me of the impossible world of E. And I wanted it to go away.

I squeezed my eyes shut. *Aim!* But I was on my own. Memory ornament, invitation to the impossible—it was still my choice to accept or reject it. I knew that amnesia was hovering in the foyer of my consciousness, waiting. The chaos of a world without rules—at least the rules I was used to—also hovered out there. I opened my eyes and moved incrementally toward chaos, because that's where my girl was.

The light changed. Heat lay on my back like a wool blanket fresh out of the dryer. I didn't have to turn around, I knew that. But maybe it wasn't chaos out there. Maybe it was Freedom. Freedom from fear. Capital F.

I stood up and brushed the marble flakes off on my pants. Then I turned.

A vast and eerily silent crowd milled beyond the garage. Thousands of people, and an ersatz castle, and a high blue sky without clouds where a dozen or so giant soap bubbles drifted serenely, unnoticed by the multitude.

All was utterly quiet until I crossed out of the garage, and then it struck me like a Phil Spector Wall Of Sound, the surf roar of the crowd and the brassy clamor of a New Orleans street band. It was *hot*, and dazzlingly bright. A trombone bell flashed the sun at me. I shaded my eyes. Mickey Mouse was working the crowd. Then I saw Aimee, waving. I felt a big goofy grin on my face, which was appropriate. "I'm going to Disneyland!" I yelled and ran to her. ○

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DALLAS: AN ESSAY

Robert Reed

Robert Reed tells us, "When I was much younger, I lived for a long year in Dallas. I wasn't particularly happy, and my writing was going badly. I saw a couple of peculiar traffic accidents, and my natural paranoia thrived. For this story, I simply shuffled reality and came up with a different set of possibilities." Bob's latest novel, *The Well of Stars*, is just out from Tor. Golden Gryphon Press will publish a collection of his tales entitled *The Cuckoo's Boys* later this year.

I was in my mid-twenties, and I was a desperately old man, always tired, suffering from peculiar aches and persistent black moods and days when I accomplished nothing but sleep. But worse were the nights when I lay awake, and with a searing, exhausted clarity saw all the ways in which I was pissing away my life. The future was a visible place to me, and it was a dim and narrow place without the barest hope, and my personal future was indistinguishable from my present—a relentless march of wasted potential and wrong turns made while time bled away, lost forever.

There's no pretty side to mental illness, and that's what was happening to me. The synapses of my brain were misfiring, leaving me clinically depressed. Today, I'm sure about that diagnosis. But at the time, in the bleak heart of that neurological turmoil, every ache felt honest, and every sadness was true and profound. If I was going to escape my future, I felt that I had to abandon my present life. And that's why I gave notice at my apartment and work, shoehorning my few possessions into my old Mustang, and then driving south to the wonderland that was Texas.

This was no random leap. Friends from college lived there—a married couple that I had visited during a couple of hard northern winters. The Texas sun and the relative warmth had already charmed me. Our plan was that I would live and work in their spare bedroom. But somewhere between negotiations and the long drive, they got pregnant. When I arrived, my promised room was being repainted an obnoxious pink. This was a disappointment for me, and a clear treachery on their part. But af-

ter a bleak, sleepless night—a very familiar night—I reassembled my strength to where I could journey out into an unfamiliar city, hunting for any hovel that would take me.

Imagine the largest apartment complex in the Free World—a city onto itself where ten thousand young professionals lived elbow-to-elbow—and then give that sprawling creation the most inappropriate name possible: The Village.

That's where I went first, and last.

I reasoned that a place of those proportions should have vacancies. And sure enough, I was told that as soon as my check cleared, I could move in. The only trick was to find an empty apartment with the smallest possible rent, and bless her, the young woman behind the desk didn't blink when I confessed that I had savings but no current job. My plan was to become a writer, and she asked what I wrote, and I told her, and her response was, "Really?" with an incurious but cheery tone. "My little brother reads that stuff."

"Good for him."

I settled on an upstairs efficiency with burgundy shag carpeting badly faded where the Texas sun had reached beneath the drapes. A high counter divided the room into a kitchen and everything else. A toilet and shower and clamshell sink were bunched together in what looked like a closet. The balcony was just large enough for two good friends. There was a doorbell, as if I would miss the slightest knock from any visitor. And beneath the bell's button was a brass medallion certifying to the world that my apartment was one hundred percent electric.

I bought a cheap phone and a mattress that covered too much of the floor, and my pregnant friends loaned me a tiny desk that I set beside the only window, my venerable Royal manual heavy enough to make the desk jiggle whenever I typed. My kitchen and clothes took a few minutes to unpack, and I propped my little black-and-white television on the counter, and what hadn't seemed like many possessions became a clutter, and it was my clutter, and I almost felt happy about my prospects.

For the next week or two, I hammered together useful routines. I woke late, usually after nine. I ate breakfast and read *The Morning News*, and when the paper was exhausted, I pretended to work. I would pretend until I was hungry again. Lunch was peanut butter and bananas. Then I'd nap, or at least shut my eyes, and when I climbed off the mattress again, I would sit at my desk and pound at the metal keys, the clatter steady enough to fill a few pages, convincing me that the day's story was progressing nicely.

In the evening, I'd drive to my friends' house. Or I would go for a swim. It was spring, and spring in Texas is nearly as warm as a northern summer. The Village featured a huge clubhouse with an Olympic-sized pool, and little swimming pools were scattered everywhere else. Closest to me was a nifty two-tiered affair, the high pool deep and cool with a waterfall churning into a shallow and much warmer puddle. There was always a girl or two, or ten, dressed in little swimsuits, basking in the last embers of day. Sometimes I found myself talking to one of them. But depression is a selfish animal, defending its territory by every means. I couldn't seem

to work my way past the light-chatter stage. I liked some of them, and I wanted to sleep with most of them; but some epiphany would always roll over me. The girls were not my type. They were too shallow or too snobbish, and some of them were obviously crazy, and the average Texan lady always prefers a man who comes with ample money attached.

"What do you do?" every girl asked.

I'd tell them what I was doing and what I hoped to accomplish.

"Really?" they would blurt. Followed by, "My little brother or cousin or some friend in high school likes that spaceship stuff."

Good for them.

I had picked up some ugly pounds after college, and with the easy resolve that arrives with a new life, I decided to work off the pounds. I swam laps at the clubhouse pool and ran laps through the Village. I can't say which of those laps were the soggiest. Summer arrives early in the South, the days hot in ways that no northern day can ever be. The Gulf of Mexico shoves its moisture north, the sun climbs higher than seems natural, and the commuting minions push their fumes into the already superheated air. For a prematurely old man carrying extra weight, dawn was the only bearable time to run. But I never seemed to wake early enough. That's why I usually waited for the sun to drop, and then I would drink a bucket of ice water and lace up the New Balances, slogging my way out into the smog and the inextinguishable heat.

At the center of the Village were little ponds and a few acres of sharp Texan grass, and winding through that private park were a set of narrow asphalt paths. I would jog around the ponds, and around them, again and again. It was rhythmic and painful and therapeutic. I would lift a hand to grunt, "Hey," to my fellow runners. Sometimes I'd stop under a light to read my watch. Thirty minutes of motion was my standard goal. A half hour seemed like nothing when I sat at my desk, pretending to write. But on foot, wearing a melting body, it was a relentless, exhausting eternity.

If memory serves, this happened very late on the Saturday night during the Memorial Day weekend. I stopped to check the time, and calculated that it was a four-minute trudge back to my apartment from where I was standing. Night had long ago fallen, yet the heat hadn't diminished more than a couple of degrees. Leaving the ponds, I began shuffling my way up one of the side streets toward Southwestern Boulevard, and at some point I heard what sounded like a shotgun blast—a big sloppy bang that came from somewhere close, the sound bouncing against the soggy bones of my face.

In Texas, gunfire is commonplace. It can even be an honorable tradition. But this felt alarmingly close, and my first response was to ratchet back my already sluggish pace, watching the world with a sudden paranoid clarity.

Maybe half a minute passed. Then I noticed a young man running, wearing nothing but white boxer shorts. He was a pale figure moving with an unnatural urgency, sprinting beside Southwestern Boulevard and crossing directly in front of me before cutting across the spiny lawn, bare white feet carrying him through the open glass door of a ground-floor apartment.

My heart was thundering along. I considered a more cowardly route. But I was tired, and I didn't feel like an extra two minutes on my feet. Besides, I might have been a little curious. Or maybe I sensed that it hadn't been a gun blast. Whatever the reason, I kept running along the apartment road—a main entranceway divided up the middle by an island forested with ornamental shrubs.

Two other people were standing along the Boulevard. A young man and young woman were staring at their own feet, looking like people trapped in a very boring date. At a distance, they seemed young and handsome. If they had a car, I didn't see it. But as I approached, I followed their gaze down, and with a slow astonishment realized that lying at their feet was a lump of garbage. Except no, it wasn't garbage but it was clothes, and there was someone inside those clothes, sprawled out on the concrete sidewalk in a pose of utter comfort.

I ran faster, and then fifty feet away, I stopped running.

Nobody noticed me. Not the pretty woman or her pretty boyfriend holding her hand, and certainly not the man on the sidewalk. The man was sleeping. Or he was a drunk who had collapsed, maybe. But then my mind noticed what my eyes must have already seen: The man's right leg was far too short and its shin had an unnatural bend to it. With a grim astonishment, I realized the leg was broken. A horrid compound fracture, obviously. And in the next instant, my mind generated its first sloppy theory: The poor son-of-a-bitch, for reasons unknown, had just fallen out of the sky.

Sweating and panting, I walked up on the odd trio.

The couple glanced at me, and with a quiet little voice, the woman asked, "Did you see it?"

"See what?" I muttered.

The boyfriend gestured toward the west. "We didn't see it either. But we sure heard it."

"The boom?" I asked.

He gave a little nod, eyes narrowing, and then a sudden odd laugh spilled out of him. "Jesus, look at that hydrant!"

The apartment road spilled into Southwestern, and past the intersection was a fire hydrant set at a crazy angle, pointing at us. I walked down the slight slope and across the apartment road, pondering the evidence. An irresistible force had struck the hydrant, but my only suspect was the man with the broken leg. I looked back at him. Then I walked toward him, counting my paces. Between the hydrant and intersection stood a slender bus stop sign. At waist height, it too was bent over. What wasn't I seeing? The concrete island that split the apartment road down the middle was planted with dense, heavily-leaved shrubs, and laying among the foliage, almost invisible, was a motorcycle, its front wheel mutilated but the rest of it in fine shape, a six-pack of beer bungied to the little chrome rack over its back wheel.

The world suddenly made sense.

I finished my walk and my count, and if memory serves, the man had been thrown twenty-five paces up a slight slope.

He wasn't wearing a helmet. But despite having landed on the back of

his bare head, he was alive. And not just a little bit alive. I could hear him breathing. Five or six or seven of us had gathered around him by then, listening to a steady wet panting that made me think that he was, against all odds, just sleeping. He was a youngish man; he could have been my age. He needed a shave and he was dressed for construction work or something similar: A blue work shirt; a pair of frayed jeans; and leather work boots. The air above him was saturated with beer vapors. It was remarkably easy to look at him with a pity-rich scorn, and I know that's what at least one of us was doing just then.

Where people came from, I couldn't say.

Maybe a dozen of us were standing around him when I finally thought to ask, "Did anyone call an ambulance?"

"I did," said one fellow. He was dressed in white boxers and standing as close to the victim as anyone. "I heard his bike coming," he reported, waving back up Southwestern. "He flew around the corner, and I knew he wouldn't make it. From the sound, he was doing seventy or better. And then, boom."

Everyone had heard the impact, or they thought they had.

"I came running. Found him. Ran back home and called." This was his boy, and he was entitled to stand closer than the rest of us. He was entitled to shake his head, remarking with a loud, clear voice, "Poor shit. Not even wearing a brain bucket."

Good phrase, I thought. Laughing now.

Suddenly everyone was talking in quiet voices, discussing the accident, each relating his or her own narrow perspective. I looked at the guy in the boxers, thinking about asking where he was from. Because he sounded like a Midwesterner. But just as I made eye contact, the fellow lying between us took an enormous wet breath, held it for an instant, and then let his breath escape like a big tire passively losing pressure.

The guy had died.

That shut everyone up. We stared down at the limp, unshaven face, waiting for him to prove us wrong. Nothing. Not a gasp or a twitch, or anything.

"A pulse?" I asked. "Does he have one?"

It seemed like the thing to do.

Thank god, the guy in the boxers muscled up the courage to kneel down. This was his boy, after all. His responsibility. With one hand, he delicately took hold of a wrist, and after glancing at his own bare wrist, he looked up, asking the crowd, "Anyone have a watch?"

Without missing a beat, this guy behind me said, "Yeah. It's ten after twelve."

We laughed. I mean, what else could we do? I laughed and unfastened my running watch and handed it down to boxer-man, and he got the angle right with the streetlamp, and after fifteen seconds, he said, "Sixty a minute. Something like that."

Encouraged by news of his survival, our corpse gave out a huge gasp and took a mammoth breath, and then resumed his steady wet breathing, utterly indifferent to the strangers looking him over.

It took the ambulance better than fifteen minutes to arrive. By then,

our increasingly large crowd had pieced together what had happened. A drunken motorcyclist. The vicious fire hydrant. Then after the man had separated from his machine, a dangling leg had clipped the careless bus stop sign, shattering its shin to mush.

The paramedics cut off the leg of his jeans, and I watched them work, taking a writer's internal notes. The calf muscles and skin had migrated up the shortened limb, looking sloppy and soggy and useless. If the victim felt anything, he gave no clue. He just kept on breathing, except for one or two more prolonged breaks. Practicing death, I suppose. A long board was finally pulled from the ambulance, and with a professional grace, the paramedics eased him onto the board and strapped him down. And that's when the girl appeared. We were twenty or thirty bystanders strong, and suddenly a cop was saying, "Pardon us," as he ushered the girl past me. With a sense of great drama, she bent over to stare at the victim. Nobody spoke. She didn't say one word. And when his patience was exhausted, the cop said, "Okay, miss. Is this or isn't this your brother?"

The air turned cold.

But in the next instant, the girl sobbed and threw up her arms, a slurring voice confessing, "Oh, I don't know. I can't tell for sure!"

Again, laughter.

The guy in the boxers had put on a shirt by then. He came over to me, smiling and tipping his hand, pretending to drink from his thumb.

Like all parties, ours depended on drunks. And now the cop took his drunk away, and ours was loaded into the ambulance to be whisked off to a care facility and feeding tubes and diapers, and if he was lucky, a simple life punctuated with the occasional pleasure. And the rest of us were left standing there, perhaps a little sad to be done now. The adventure was finished. I know I had a fat tangle of emotions tied to the moment. But it was very late and I was drained, and I didn't want to be the last person to leave. So I started easing my way past the others, and when I reached the outer edge of the group, I saw a familiar face. A pleasant rounded face topped with a precise crew cut. The face was smiling, apparently at me. And like that, I stopped and blinked in honest puzzlement, and after a long moment, the smiling face spoke with a frothy amusement, telling me my name.

I told him his.

Almost five years it had been, and wasn't this something?

It would have been the next day, that Sunday afternoon, when I told my married friends the entire epic—about the wreck and the amusing rabble that had gathered, and with a final flourish, I mentioned, "Oh, by the way. Guess who I bumped into there."

"Who?" they asked, in reflex.

Then I threw another coincidence into the pot. "And guess who's got an apartment just half a mile from mine."

Easily and without a trace of surprise, they offered me the correct name. Then the expectant mother added, "My folks said he was down here, somewhere. He's doing research for—"

I blurted out the corporation's name.

"Yeah. Them."

I'll call our mutual friend Dallas.

"I guess I forgot," I admitted. "You and Dallas both came from Blue Springs."

She was a year younger than the rest of us, and more energetic, having finished college in three crisp years.

"How's the genius look?" she asked.

"The same." We were in our twenties, and that's how the universe worked for us. Faces never seemed to change. "We talked . . . I don't know . . . five minutes or so. . . ."

"About politics?" her husband joked.

Everyone had a good laugh at Dallas's expense.

Then I told them, "No, not a breath about politics." And after a contemplative silence, I added, "You know, I've always thought . . . if you forget what he believes, Dallas is a perfectly good guy. . . ."

I can't remember when I called him or when I was first invited over to his place. But it was probably the next week, and even if I can't recall details, I know exactly how the visit went. Dallas had an upstairs one-bedroom apartment in a newer portion of the Village. His balcony was spacious, and it overlooked one of the Village's countless swimming pools. His furniture was new. His housekeeping was immaculate. If it was a week-night, he would have been wearing his work clothes, minus the dark tie and dress shoes. If it was a weekend, jeans were permitted, but only new jeans washed in cold water, still thick with their blue dye. Dallas was a modest man. He was a Midwestern man. The perfect host, he always offered me the contents of his kitchen, and there was always a cold can of pop waiting, and a glass and ice, plus three or four coasters in easy reach. I've never quite trusted politeness, since it can mask so much of what a person is really like. Yet I couldn't help but feel charmed by the free Dr. Pepper and salty snacks and how Dallas would sit in his recliner with his stockinged feet up, asking me about my writing and life, wishing me success with the effortless zeal of someone who knows more than a little something about succeeding in the world.

I once asked, "What's the worst grade you ever got?"

"A's," he told me. Flat out.

"Not college," I said. "High school."

"They gave Ones. I got all Ones."

"Okay. How about graduate school?"

No hesitation. "All A's," he said, allowing himself a thin, prideful grin.

Dallas already had his doctorate. After college, he went to a private institution with an accelerated program in physics, and, armed with an advanced degree, he got work with a computer firm that had too much R&D money. If prompted, he would talk in general terms about his current project. I already knew more than most people about chips and data storage and the mystical world of electrons. But the nuts-and-bolt details couldn't have been more boring, and I can't remember specifics, and since this was more than twenty years ago, I'm sure that all of those vaunted new technologies long ago turned clunky and crude.

We talked about old times at college. I had only been a biology major,

true. But we'd shared a few classes and professors, and there were classmates both of us knew. Sometimes I talked about growing up in a relatively big city, while he offered tales about life in little Blue Springs; and occasionally I would repeat the Blue Springs stories to the expectant mother, giving her the chance to retell them from her vantage point.

She always liked Dallas, but they passed through school separated by a full grade, and both of them were loners, if different sorts of loners. They were friendly but never friends. When the four of us got together for dinner, at the couple's house, I felt as if I was Dallas's old buddy and the others were outsiders. When the conversation grew stale, I knew what to say to my buddy to get him talking again, to keep him interested and engaged. I liked the guy, and if I saw him today, I'd feel as if I was seeing an old friend. Sure, he said things that left us uneasy. He loved Reagan and hated the Soviet Union. He loved the U.S. military, but his favorite generals were Confederates and George Patton. Yet politics was just politics, abstract and permissible. The trouble came when Dallas smelled acceptance where there was only polite patience, and then he would say something more. America was full of crime, he would complain. The welfare state was unfair and criminal and it sapped the nation of its greatest strengths. Or he might talk flippantly about some imprecise ghetto, or mention African-Americans in a certain coded way. Not that his basic views were any worse than those held by my own father or most of my father's generation. For Dallas, it was as if the last twenty years of the civil rights movement hadn't occurred, and if I was forced into a corner and told to defend my old friend, I'd argue that he was pretty much like any white male who grew up in a rural landscape—a landscape that was stolen from the Native Americans and then settled by Germans and Swedes. The differences in Dallas were more of tone and volume, and an intellectual depth, and, despite rumors to the contrary, the Bill of Rights gave him permission to think whatever he damn well wanted to think.

With religion, Dallas had distinct opinions, and he held onto them tenaciously. During high school, he'd stumbled across a churchless church led by a retired major or colonel whose name never quite stuck with me. Instead of Sunday services, my friend listened to tapes. Canned lectures, or sermons, or whatever. Sometimes I showed up unexpectedly, and after ushering me inside and offering a pop, Dallas would hurry back into his bedroom to rewind the tape recorder to a convenient spot. Standing in the kitchen, I would hear little snatches of an old military voice talking about Scripture and Communism, great destinies waiting for our nation and wicked perils ready to destroy our world.

My married friends didn't know much more about that religion or its leader. But through work, the husband had met a couple of other men who belonged to this seemingly nameless faith. "They're smart guys," he offered with a hint of frustration. "Not the sort you'd expect to fall for a cult." And my friend was no atheist. He had seriously considered becoming a minister in a mainstream faith. Shaking his head, he admitted, "They're smart, but like Dallas is smart. You know? They're very organized and quick to learn, but . . . what else is it, dear. . . ?"

"They're rigid."

"Inflexible, to a point . . . yes. . . ."

"Plus racist," she snapped. "And they're sexist, too." Then she gave me a hard look, waiting for my rebuttal.

The best that I could say was, "I like the guy anyway."

"I'm just saying," she remarked. Then cupping her hands over her swelling belly, she admitted, "I like Dallas, too. But sometimes, he seems like this really bright guy who doesn't know much about anything."

Two or three times a week, I'd go over to Dallas's apartment, and we'd grill out or call out for pizza, then invest the evening just chewing the proverbial lard. That's something I don't do anymore; I can't remember when I last spoke to just one person for hours, beating a hapless subject to death.

Girls were a viable topic. We'd study the pool beneath his balcony, discussing the tans and tanned bodies that were lined up for our visceral pleasure. If I remember, Dallas had a thing for buxom, girl-next-door girls. Or was that me? Either way, he was a thorough gentleman about his lust, using only polite terms for the female anatomy. On all occasions he was relentlessly mannerly, though his manners were built on Old Testament values: The female sex was smaller than us, and weaker, and he often reminded me that we wouldn't be Christian men if we didn't want to protect our women from the hazards running amok in the world.

Like a billion guys, we had a thing for sports. We could watch any contest at any time, forming hard opinions about players and strategies and where the game had been won or lost. For Dallas, football was a passion. A subreligion, and a rich source of honorable moral lessons. Unlike me, he had played the game in high school. He wasn't tall, but he had a robust frame that should have served him well in the small-town divisions. The trouble was, Dallas was slow. A favorite coach once threw an arm around him, telling him flat out, "Son, you couldn't run out of sight in a week!"

Dallas loved that story, laughing at himself whenever he told it.

Like me, he had very few friends. I remember meeting just one of them: A buddy from grad school—an ex-Marine several years our senior—staying the night while driving cross-country. I expected a big strong jarhead with tattoos, but what I met was a short pudgy fellow already practicing the middle-aged comb-over. The two men belonged to the same church; when I arrived, Dallas's tape recorder was set on the coffee table. But neither man mentioned the connection. They talked about school. About Reagan. About the swimming pool and its girls. The ex-Marine was something of a gourmet cook, of all things, and he tried to teach us a few secrets from the productive kitchen. Over a dynamite red snapper, the two Cold Warriors discussed the coming conflagration with the Soviet Bloc: When would they invade Germany, and would China join the Bloc, and which side would the French belong to? I absorbed as much of that catastrophe as possible, and then I excused myself, leaving the two puffy warriors to finish Armageddon by themselves.

Dallas rarely met my few acquaintances, either. Which was part of the reason why I felt close to the man. Like me, he lacked some basic social gene. Like me, he had a routine and he was loyal to it. Work was honor-

able, and he believed that good people lived quiet, unassuming lives, and I can't fault any of those bedrock notions. But I also liked him because when I talked about my work, he would listen to me. Not just politely. Not just for a few minutes. But he listened with a perceptive if somewhat inexperienced ear.

No, he didn't read my kind of writing. Save for the occasional Michener and Wouk, fiction didn't hold his interest. But the future was a real place for both of us, and it was immeasurably important, and as the summer passed, that became our best common ground.

I could rattle on forever about space travel and the grand potentials in the new technologies, real or imagined. And Dallas listened with the same purposeful intensity that had brought him perfect grades in school. When I moved too fast or took too many unreasonable leaps, he would stop me, asking a question, or ten questions. And when he grew bored, I would stir him up. I knew tricks. "You know what," I'd say. "In our lives, maybe in just a few years, we're going to build machines that think as well as men. And then, better."

That always made Dallas sit up, blood coloring his round face.

Then he would dismiss me, shaking his head, explaining to the foolish layman, "We're so far from understanding our own brains, much less making them from scratch. Even the best microchips . . . well, they're huge and they're very simple. . . ."

"But getting smaller and faster all the time," I reminded him.

"No," he would snap. Astonished by my ignorance and undoubtedly proud of his own expertise, he'd explain, "There are huge differences between neurons and silicon chips. In structure. In packaging. In the entire design." Then his deepest-held beliefs surfaced. "Humans are unique," he told me. "The best that we could do, ever, is create a machine that can pretend to think like us. And even then, only to a degree."

"How about in another thousand years?" I asked.

"No."

"In a million?"

Dallas would smile, politely but fiercely, and without a wisp of self-doubt, he would say, "Never. Which means forever. No."

"We're unique," I quoted.

"Exactly."

"Then what about alien intelligence?"

He would blink and force up a laugh. "What about it?"

"Do you think little green men exist?"

Dallas had a way of looking past me, his gaze glassy and engrossed. Then he would admit, "Really, I couldn't say. I don't have any data."

"But what's your best guess?" I would press.

"Not in our galaxy, they don't." He said it flatly, and he never sounded more certain. "The odds are just too enormous that there would be another world of the right size, in the proper orbit around the perfect sun, and that all the biochemical necessities would line up in the correct fashion, and no big asteroids would hit it, and no passing suns would explode."

"Then we're alone," I would growl.

A sober expression built on what only seemed to be a simple face. Then,

with an easy gravity, he would add, "That's why we have such an enormous responsibility here. You see? Our species, and our way of life . . . everything's so precarious . . . and that's why it matters so much. . . ."

Nothing makes a person into a nationalist faster than abandoning his homeland for another country. And that's what Texas did to me. My state university fielded a good football team that year. No, a great team. A national championship team. Even if I hadn't moved away, I would have watched the games. But living in Texas was the excuse to be homesick and homeproud at the same time. And my new best friend was an extraordinary fan: Dallas knew every first-string player by name, and the plays, and our coaches, and, most important, he had a big color television that with sufficient tinkering was able to pull cable channels from the air. We always got together to watch the games. Our team won that fall, and won, and won again. Then on the first Saturday in October, Dallas called before eight in the morning, waking me, telling me with a flat but apologetic voice that there had been some sort of emergency, that he had to make an appearance at work, but he would get back in time for the kickoff.

He kept his word, if only barely.

I was climbing the stairs on one side of his building, and he came up the opposite side, halfway panting, fishing his keys from his trousers pocket. He looked tired, and his smile was like a picture of a smile, not quite convincing anyone. But he didn't explain why he was late, and, being Dallas, he didn't let himself grouse about the stupid, cruel bosses who would call him in to work on the weekend. I'd already eaten lunch. He hadn't. He brought out potato chips and pop, and he opened a cold beer and drained it. Usually Dallas allowed himself one game-day beer. But then he opened a second can minutes after kickoff, and I watched him drain it and open a third before we were through the first quarter.

There are moments when I envy people with ordinary salaried jobs. But this wasn't one of those times.

I asked, "Anything happen at work?"

He didn't react. Our team was winning again, but he had to remember to smile, shrugging and setting his new empty on the cork disk. "Nothing much," he remarked.

"How are the chips?" I joked, rattling the sack.

He said, "Fine," too quickly, missing the humor. "They're fine." Then he glanced at me, the smile faltering, and something about his face was suddenly years older than it should have been.

The poor guy was down. Which was a state I knew something about. So I told him, "After the game, let's go to my place. I bought some cheap steaks yesterday. We can broil them, and I don't know . . . get some potato salad up at Tom Thumb. . . ."

Dallas's eyes were pointed at me. But I don't think he saw me.

"Fine," he said again. He might have been describing his computer chips again. I wasn't sure until he said, "I'll get the salad. Okay?"

"Agreed."

Our team won, again. I walked home and cleaned up before the appointed time, but he didn't show. So I called his place, and nobody picked

up. Dallas was already half an hour late, which was bizarre behavior for him. Then, just as I felt a stab of concern, the doorbell rang.

Dallas arrived carrying a paper bag filled with beer and Dr. Pepper and three kinds of supermarket salad plus a tub of ice cream, and after stocking my refrigerator with his gifts, he said, "It's early. How about a swim?"

"At the clubhouse?" I asked.

"You've got a closer pool, don't you?" He was wearing shorts and a T-shirt, the fringe of a swimsuit showing above the belt.

I changed in my bathroom. Somehow, that felt best. Then I put on shorts and a shirt and found my least smelly towel, and we walked over to the local pool. A couple of girls were sunning themselves—a last dose of UV before winter. One of the girls was very dark, the straps of her bikini pulled down to let those magnificent shoulders bake all the better. I can still see her sitting nearby, eyes hidden behind sunglasses. Jokingly, I remarked, "So this is why you got me out here?"

Dallas seemed to laugh, but just for a moment.

Cool nights had chilled the deep upper water, but the lower pool had been warmed by the day's sun. We climbed in and splashed for a few minutes. Dallas was no swimmer. In modesty or out of respect for the waning sun, he wore his T-shirt, the soaked fabric hanging heavy on his broad body. Once or twice, I caught him watching me. At some point, I felt an uneasiness that made me more angry than anything else. I was feeling relatively good on that particular day. My nagging blackness had temporarily receded, and I didn't want anything to threaten what could almost be confused for happiness.

Dallas moved back toward the waterfall, hunkering down in front of the splash. Then with a little nod, he coaxed me closer.

I got near enough to feel the water grow cooler.

Then, with a quiet and very odd tone, he spoke. "I've got something for you." After a deep breath, he said, "A story idea," and I could smell the beer riding on his breath.

"A story?" I repeated.

He said, "If you want it."

"Sure," I said. "Tell me."

But he had to first lick his lips a few times. And he glanced over at the bare-shouldered girl. Then he slipped deeper into the waterfall's spray, saying, "What if?" almost too quietly to be heard.

"Yeah?" I coaxed.

"There is another living planet," he proposed with a grave, sober voice. "Not the Earth, but not much different from us, either. It has oceans and continents, and free oxygen, and living on it is one highly intelligent, tool-using species—"

"Okay."

"The species prospers. It learns to farm and build cities and nation-states. Religions and armies are built, and culture. And eventually, the sciences emerge, plus most of our modern technologies."

I nodded and said nothing.

As the cool water washed over the back of his head, Dallas asked, "What if . . . what if one of these alien scientists came across a secret, un-

expected machine? By accident, I mean. Without looking for it, or even suspecting that it could exist. A string of unlikely events ends up exposing the machine—”

“Whose machine?”

“I don’t know.” He offered a shrug and a shy dip of the head.

“What? Like a spaceship?”

“No.” Shaking his head, he explained, “It’s larger than a spaceship. And quite a bit stranger.”

“Okay. Where is this machine?”

“Everywhere,” he said. And having said it, he broke into a wide, odd grin. “At the very least, it is an envelope easily large enough to contain the entire planet.”

“Huh,” I said. Then I asked, “So what’s the big envelope do?”

He hesitated.

“Wait,” I blurted, thinking of another question. “What’s it made of?”

“Is that important?”

“And why can’t we see the machine?”

Dallas hesitated, glancing at me while remarking, “There’s no ‘we.’ This isn’t our world.”

“Okay. But why’s it invisible?”

“Many things are,” he assured. Speaking as a rigorously trained physicist, Dallas reminded me, “Neutrinos are everywhere, and we only rarely see them. Except with gravity, we can’t see the dark matter between the stars. And there are highly organized relationships between every atom, and quantum actions that occur over a great distance, and, on an individual basis, all of these effects are nearly impossible to detect.”

“You’re not going to tell me what it’s made of.”

“Composition isn’t important,” he replied. “That’s just a detail.”

Which was a very odd statement, coming from a man who had a tenacious love for details.

Again, I asked, “So what did this envelope do?”

“Did, and does.”

“It’s still functioning?”

He looked off into the distance, a smile flickering. “What it does, it helps.”

“Helps?”

“In subtle ways, yes. Constantly and carefully.”

“It helps the aliens?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“By protecting them. Supporting them. Making certain their world remains habitable, helping them develop and prosper, and making it much less likely that they destroy everything that they’ve accomplished.”

“But how?” I blurted. “If you want a good story, you need a mechanism here. How does this fancy machine act on the aliens?”

He started to answer.

“Wait,” I said. “Let’s just suppose we’re talking about human beings. And your mysterious envelope is wrapped around the Earth.”

Dallas let his eyes fall halfway closed.

"Hypothetically," I cautioned. "Just so I can imagine this better."

"Okay."

"How does an invisible machine protect and support us?"

The eyes opened wide. "By listening to our troubles," he began. "And through a variety of means, solving them."

I said, "Okay."

Then I shook my head, adding, "You're talking about prayer. Aren't you?"

"Maybe." Dallas shrugged and tipped his head back under the falling water for a moment. Then, with a low, certain voice, he said, "But prayer is really only a tiny component. Important sometimes, but rarely critical."

A little laugh seeped out of me.

With a thick finger, Dallas tapped the side of his head. "A hard drought comes, and the world prays for rain. Rain ceremonies are held in every capital. Priests make all the usual sacrifices to the rain gods. But most of the wishing comes from the millions of farmers who watch their crops die, each one of them spending every waking hour imagining a sky filled with storm clouds."

"And the rains always come?" I asked doubtfully.

"They always have," Dallas remarked. Then with a grin, he added, "Did you know? Over the last hundred years, our climate is as wet and stable as it has been in the last hundred thousand years."

"Because our farmers imagine rain," I muttered.

"Maybe because there have never been so many people wishing together," he countered.

"Besides climate," I asked, "what does this envelope do?"

"Whatever is asked of it," he replied. "It supports good nations over the evil ones, helps the just and slowly destroys the cruel. Just wars are won, or they are lost in honorable ways. The envelope lifts prosperity, blunts plagues, and sometimes, maybe . . . it gives a great insight to some ripe mind. . . ."

Damn silly, I thought.

But instead of saying it, I returned to an earlier topic. "And how did we actually find this vast, invisible machine?"

"I said. By accident."

"You're not going to tell me how?"

"It's just a story. You'll have to make something up."

"Is this machine . . . what? Magic?"

He snorted. "No."

"Or like a computer? Is that how it operates?"

He smiled for an instant, saying, "Not particularly. No."

"But how does it actually do its job?"

"It steers us." Then he seemed to hear himself, and he added quietly, "It steers the aliens, I mean. It guides them and their world through an ocean of potentials."

I didn't respond.

He tipped his head beneath the falling water, and then brought it out and spat, suddenly looking a little drunk. "Existence only looks inevitable," he warned me. "Every moment can happen a thousand differ-

ent ways. A trillion different ways. What the envelope does . . . if you know it's there and study it carefully . . . you can see it manipulating people . . . steering them through the multitude of disagreeable possibilities . . . finding the easiest, smoothest course that keeps the world living and its population a little happier with each succeeding generation. . . ."

I stared at him for a long, uncomfortable moment. "Is this your entire story? Aliens find an artifact that protects them?"

"It's just an idea," he admitted.

I agreed. "But it takes more than one idea to build a story," I cautioned. "Where's the drama here? If you have some force, some subtle weird presence, that's always keeping you safe—"

"Not safe," he warned. "Not on an individual basis, normally. It just insulates the world and your species from the worst hazards."

"Like nuclear war?"

"Of course," he replied, without hesitation.

"Who built it?"

"Why?"

"Maybe that's your story," I offered. "The alien world . . . it could have been seeded eons ago by a highly advanced species. Seeded and left behind. But the mother species didn't want to leave its children unprotected, particularly from themselves. . . ."

His eyes narrowed for a moment. "That's one possibility, I suppose. . . ."

Halfway laughing, I said, "Maybe the universe is full of shrouded, protected worlds. That could be interesting, I suppose."

He didn't respond.

"But I'm still having trouble finding your plot here. Do you understand?"

"Not really."

"What you're telling me. . . ." I paused, thinking it through for a long moment. "If I decide to jump off a high building, I'll go splat. But humanity itself would never wish for suicide, which is why it can never happen."

He nodded carefully.

"Which means all the things that people like myself worry about . . . all the ways the world can end . . . they aren't genuine threats. Environmental collapse. Solar flares. A superflu. Or total war with the Warsaw Pact." I laughed with a scorching disdain, telling him, "We've wasted billions building missiles that can never hit their targets. Nukes that will never detonate. The Soviets and America might trade a few cities during some little war. But according to your logic . . . what? JFK pushes us to the brink of war over some missiles down in Cuba, but of course there is no drama. No reason to worry at all. We're being steered past every disaster, every miscalculation. The incident has no choice but to end with the best imaginable outcome."

If anything, Dallas appeared deaf. His face was empty and the staring eyes had a vacant quality, like the glass spheres buried in a wall-mounted deer. The day was rapidly ending. The two sunbathers had vanished; we were the only people in view. Into the growing chill of an autumn night, my best friend in the world stood, his soaked shirt looking heavy and clumsy as he walked into the middle of the pool.

"It's a stupid story," he allowed.

"Paranoid and more than a little goofy," I added. "Sorry."

But he took the news with the same good humor that he used when the football coach told him that he was slow. He laughed. He showed me his face laughing. Then with a louder voice than necessary, he said, "Those steaks. How about it?"

The intriguing, intoxicating kiss of depression comes with visions, dark and profound, your world filled with a noble doom, countless bits of paranoia offering themselves for your admiration and adoration. And when you're a writer, or pretending to be, the early stages of depression can masquerade as a blessing. You can still bang out words on a sheet of cheap typing paper. You can even string your words into sentences and complete entire pages and stack the pages neatly, declaring your story finished and shipping it off to an editor. That's what I had accomplished for an entire half-year: I wrote stories and sent them off, and when they came back unsold, I sent them out again, feeling that flicker of optimism that always preys on gamblers. It wasn't until the shortened days of November that my energies truly failed me. And even then, I didn't think of depression as the culprit. I was reasonably sad. I was understandably tired. And if I didn't climb out of bed until ten or eleven in the morning, what did it matter? And if the pages weren't being filled with words, whom did it actually hurt?

From Dallas, I heard little.

He was busy at work, including a weeklong visit to the company's California division. After he was supposed to have been home for a few days, I found the resolve to call his apartment. His phone rang and rang. But it was barely seven in the evening; he was probably still driving home from work. I made a mental note to call at eight, and then forgot until after ten, which was too late, but I called anyway, counting the rings until I lost interest in that little game.

I tried to reach him at work the next day. Not for the first time, I looked up the number for the main switchboard, told the operator exactly who I wanted, but then I found myself talking to the wrong person. It was an ordinary, even banal mistake; the two men had similar names. Again, I explained whom I wanted, and the fellow promised to transfer me, and after a song or two of elevator music, the line was abruptly disconnected.

That evening, for the first time in ages, I went running. In the black wet cold, I slugged my way around the ponds, and then on an impulse, I found my way back up to Dallas's building. His living room was lit up. So I went upstairs and rang the bell, watching the faint light leaking through the peephole. The light was eclipsed, and a moment later, the door opened. My friend gave me a good look. A smile emerged, followed by a near-giggle, and with a sweeping gesture, he told me, "Come on in. Please."

He said, "I've been meaning to call you. It's work—"

"I know," I started to say.

"Dr. Pepper? Help yourself." Then he seemed a little embarrassed,

adding, "I've got something to finish. Just a minute. And if you would? Stay off the furniture? You're a little soggy, and all."

I said, "Sure."

Dallas vanished behind his bedroom door. I fished out a cold can and opened it, and I heard a hard clunk followed by the muted voice of a man speaking with a practiced authority. On quiet feet, I wandered into the little hallway. With my head tipped, I heard the military bearing in the voice, the speaker remarking with a reasoned tone, "The dark races, like all children, suffer from a poverty of discipline."

When Dallas emerged, he found me sitting on his living room floor.

As best as I can remember it, my intention was to ask, "Really, what is this goofball racist faith of yours?"

But then the phone rang, abruptly and urgently.

Dallas answered. "Hello," he said, his gaze going off into the distance. Slowly, a smile emerged. Then he laughed loudly and called to me, giggling when he asked, "Guess who had their baby!"

I talked briefly to the new and happily exhausted father.

Dallas suggested that we go to the hospital that night. "Get home and shower," he told me, "and I'll swing by in forty minutes. Okay?"

"Sure."

Dallas drove an astonishingly old Monte Carlo. But it was clean, of course, and in good repair, and since both of us were distracted and mostly silent, there was nothing to listen to but the purposeful hum of the engine.

The baby girl was smaller than I had expected. Mom looked like hell, and both parents were numb with happiness. I was completely out of my element. About the visit, I remember almost nothing. About the drive home again, I remember more. I glanced over at Dallas before looking straight ahead, and then with a voice that was dry and a little nervous, I said, "I figured out that story of yours."

Nothing happened for a long moment, except that the car accelerated before slowing again. Then he quietly said, "Forget it."

"But I came up with something interesting," I said.

"I never should have mentioned it," he replied. Dallas was staring straight ahead, shaking his head while trying to laugh. "You were right. It was a silly idea for a story."

"Your hero finds an alien machine," I said. "Some kind of marvel designed to answer the world's demands, keeping us mostly happy and reasonably safe." Then after a dramatic pause, I added, "But it is a machine. And every machine can be manipulated. Fooled. And sometimes, stolen."

Silence.

"Just think what could be done," I mentioned. "If you could take control of the world's envelope for yourself. If you could somehow find a way to talk for all of humanity, I mean. If God heard no other voice but yours. . . ?"

He punched the accelerator, just a little.

"That would make a compelling little story," I allowed. "How could one man shoulder that enormous burden. . . ?"

I drove home at Thanksgiving and stayed through the holidays. By

home, I mean my parents' house. By stayed, I mean that I slept in the cold basement, my bedroom remodeled into my father's new home office. I was as welcome as any adult child without a job or prospects of gainful employment. Advice was given to me frequently, without tact. Encouragement was offered with pointed voices. In the end, I was being treated to some rather harsh speeches about the poverty waiting in my future if I didn't pull my head out of my ass.

"Hey, folks," I could have told them. "I see blacker shit than that coming!"

Our football team lost its championship game. I've never been more emotionally bound to a sporting event, hanging on every play until the gruesome end, and, when it was finished, I was crestfallen. Sick with misery. I crawled into the office—my old bedroom—and called Texas. My married friends were under the mistaken impression that they'd seen an exciting and honorable game. What Dallas thought, I don't know. His phone rang and rang, and he never answered, and I teased myself with the image of his thick body dangling off his balcony, one of his narrow work ties yanked snug around his choked throat.

That next day, I drove back to my apartment.

A week later, when I finally got around to calling Dallas, he claimed that he had gone walking through The Village after the game, working off his nervous energies.

Probably so.

I didn't see him often in those next couple of months. In part, it felt like a mutual decision. We'd obviously had too much of each other's company, and this was a convenient break. And more to the point, my savings were spent, and, needing cash, I got work with a temporary service, logging odd hours and long hours doing jobs ranging from the boring to the transcendently awful.

The Texas sun vanished that winter. But instead of good Northern snows, there was rain, and while the air was usually above freezing, there was a constant wet chill that forced its way into my home and my bones.

An old wall lamp was nailed above my little desk. On a weeknight in late February, I was sitting in front of my typewriter, thinking hard about turning off the lamp and going to bed. I remember looking up and hearing a noise, impatient and violent. Tires skidded. That's what I heard. And there was a thud or several thuds in quick succession, followed by an impact that I felt through my feet and the chair, and the building shuddered and my old lamp jumped up, pivoting on its bent nail and then bouncing, sending its borrowed momentum back into the quivering wall.

A car crash. Someone had wrecked. Adrenaline took me, and I was running. The endless cold rain was falling. I didn't see any wreckage on my side of the apartment building. There was no sidewalk to the south, so I ran through the sopping grass, circling and finding what looked like a monster squatting against the west-facing wall. That was my first impression: Eyes glowed at me through a bluish breath rising like smoke. The eyes had a wounded, hateful life to them, and I heard a deep wet voice saying, "Uuush," from somewhere behind the eyes. For a sliver of an instant, I pulled up short. Then I let myself realize that it was just a car—

a newish Corvette, as it happened—and it had come off Southwestern, slamming sideways into the brick face of the apartment building.

I looked through the open passenger window, ready to grab anyone and pull him to safety before the car erupted in flames. Except the car was empty. And both doors were shut, the driver's door jammed against the dished-in wall, helping to keep the wall from collapsing completely.

I scanned the surrounding grounds. The only people were neighbors coming out, alone and in twos. Not even two minutes had passed since the crash. I ran home, punching 911 on my cheap phone, reporting what had happened in a rush of words and breath. The operator wanted my name and address. I don't remember giving either. Then I threw on a rain jacket and stepped outside again, flying down the stairs to where I found a tall stranger waiting for me.

He said, "Excuse me," with the echo of a Germanic accent. He was an elderly man, but fit. Long delicate hands lifted into the air between us, and betraying embarrassment, he said, "Can you help me, sir? I seem to have misplaced my car."

Go on. Try and guess what I was thinking.

"Your car?" I said, letting sarcasm thicken my voice. "Can't find it?"

He said, "I cannot," and blinked, and winced. Then he glanced at the parking lot in front of my building, observing, "This is a very confusing place, I think."

"Have you already looked here?" I asked, pointing at the rows of cars.

The old man didn't seem to hear me. In profile, he was a handsome fellow with sharp features—the kind of face you'd see on a Roman coin. The lights around us made his eyes bright, but it was an empty, lost brilliance signifying nothing but a teary sheen. He gave a little sigh and turned to face me again.

"I looked," he reported. "My car is not there."

"Then let's go find it for you," I told him.

I took him back around the building. Of course. I led him up to the Corvette, and then paused. An audience had gathered, people talking quietly, the bravest few peering into the open window and poking at the loose bricks. The headlights still burned, but the antifreeze had run dry. One of The Village's private cops was pulling up along Southwestern, his pretend-cruiser flashing its little red lights. I glanced at my companion, trying to read his expression. He seemed bored. His gaze kept reaching into the distance. So I asked him, flat out, "Anything look familiar?"

A low snort was his first response. Then he pointed with a mock-certainty, saying, "I parked my car over there, I think. Yes."

No, he had not. We strolled into the next lot, looking at every vehicle, and we did the same with a lot to the north, and we might have hit another two or three in our little tour of The Village. I was patient as a saint. I admitted that it was difficult to navigate this maze of lookalike buildings and unnumbered lots. With a reasoning tone, I asked about the make and color of his missing car. "I'll know it when I see it," he promised me, or maybe himself.

The man was drunk, or he was senile. Or maybe he'd smacked his head when his Corvette skidded into the wall. Any of those explanations could

have been true. Or none. I asked if he lived in The Village, and, with a haughty tone, he said, "Oh, no. No." Which led to the next reasonable question: "Who did you come to visit?" But he wouldn't tell me or give me the barest clue. It was enough that I was walking with him, and he seemed desperate to keep me close. We ended up beside the two-tiered swimming pool, and over the sound of the frigid falls, I suggested, "You could go back to my place and call for help. If someone came and got you—"

"No, no, no," he muttered. He begged. "I don't want . . . I can't . . . no. . . !"

We weren't alone just then. I looked up, noticing a guy a little younger than me walking away from us. Or rather, limping away from us. He was dressed in office clothes. Good trousers, good shoes, and a rumpled sports jacket. He was making steady progress despite a weak left leg. But there was a pitiful quality that made me wonder if he was just as lost as the man standing beside me.

I steered my man back toward my apartment. I didn't spell out my plan or even mention our destination. But I meant to deliver him back to the scene of the accident. Even if it wasn't his car, I'd let the authorities take him and help him. That was the best scheme I could come up with.

But we didn't make it back.

We were crossing my parking lot—the lot he had already searched—and he stopped abruptly and said, "There," as the hand went into the jacket pocket, keys jangling. "Yes, I think . . . yes. . . !"

It was a little sports car. I don't remember the model, but I know it was foreign. Japanese, I think. Not that it matters.

He cried out, "Yes," when his key fit the lock. Then he opened the driver's door and hesitated. What was he forgetting? He had the look of a man searching his thoughts. Oh, yes, he remembered now. He looked back at me with a mixture of relief and resurgent pride, perhaps deciding that I belonged to an embarrassing past best left behind. He said, "Well then," in lieu of thanks. "I'm going now."

And he drove away.

I returned to the wreck just in time. The limping boy wandered up when I did, and someone in the audience pointed him out to the official cops. They eased him aside for a little chat, probably curious about his blood-alcohol levels and why he felt compelled to leave the scene of an accident. That left the private cop in charge—a puffy little guy who looked as if he had failed every test in his life, save the one that gave him this minor job—and he used his newfound authority to shout at everyone, "Go home. Go away. There's nothing to see here. Leave!"

Better advice was never given.

I spent the entire night loading my belongings back into my car, and early in the morning, after making final arrangements with The Village, I drove over to see my married friends and have a last long look at their newborn. "Your desk is there, if you want it," I said, handing over my last key. "Take the mattress and anything else you find. Or leave them. I'm paid up into next month, and then they'll dump everything and keep my deposit for their trouble."

My friends were disappointed but not even a little surprised. The wife was the one who asked, "What about Dallas? Have you talked to him yet?"

I hadn't. Honestly, I hadn't even thought of it. But because it seemed unlikely that I would actually reach him, I drove back across town before leaving. I rang the bell in the middle of a weekday morning, and for no imaginable reason, Dallas was home. "Caught a cold," he claimed, though I don't remember much more than a little hoarseness in his voice. "Come in," he beckoned. "Want a pop?"

I had a quick one. "I'm leaving," I explained. "Driving north today."

He took the news calmly, and happily. About our last conversation, I remember very little. But he was polite, I'm sure, and I know that he shook my hand when I left, wishing me well in my life, and I told him, "You, too. All the best."

I hadn't slept in more than twenty-four hours, and I felt wonderful. I drove into the white ruins of the winter, pushing into Kansas before stopping at a Holiday Inn for the night. And I woke up feeling energized and ready. The next day was bright and cold, and my head was perfectly clear. I remember driving across the last slice of Kansas, thinking easily and rapidly about every possible subject. For no clear reason, my depression had lifted. Had been expelled. I wasn't exactly giddy with happiness, but I could suddenly cope with the world and my own dark nature . . . and with few exceptions, that's how it has been for the last twenty-plus years.

On occasion, I still visit Texas.

My married friends have two kids, nearly grown now. They used to socialize with my old best friend on occasion, but Dallas remains busy at work. The last time they saw him was at his wedding; his wife is a beautiful brown Hispanic woman, I'm told. Which must mean something. People can change their minds and nature, it means. Or love is relentlessly powerful. It means that Dallas isn't the same person that I remember, or I didn't really know him in the first place. But even when I visit, I never seem able to find time or the desire to seek him out. Which also means something, I suppose.

Writers are a paranoid species of borderline personalities.

Even on our good days, we see relationships where others see nothing, and obvious stories where sober minds find mere chaos. That day, driving north across the plains, I found myself replaying the moment in the swimming pool—how Dallas told me his story idea while hunkering down in the water, as if worried that someone might overhear any part of this very strange topic.

He was never the most imaginative soul. The notion that he could invent something as outlandish as that, using his own talents, struck me as laughable. Preposterous, even. But didn't he claim that the machine also delivered insights to the ripe mind? Which made me wonder: Could any of it be true? Was there an enveloping machine that lay over the world and our souls, helping us to navigate through a universe of potential disasters? And did my friend discover it by simple accident? Unless Dallas was only repeating what others had told him. What he had learned with the same studiousness that had earned him straight A's.

Was a secret project unfolding somewhere inside Texas?

Of course there was, I thought. Texas is rich with secret projects. But what if one of those projects was delving into the workings of the invisible God machine? And if so, who was in charge? An odd nationalistic religion? Some multi-national corporation? Or the most secret division of the government? Unless of course it was my friend working alone, in his spare time, using a collection of homemade and very much ad hoc equipment.

If there was a miracle machine, I wondered, how would somebody study its operation and potentials?

On a small, clinical scale, of course.

Then an obvious question finally occurred to me: How did Dallas end up at that first accident? He was a homebody, and it was late on a Saturday night. His apartment was more than a quarter of a mile from the crash, and I knew for a fact that from his balcony, looking out over an empty swimming pool, he couldn't have seen anything suspicious.

With a paranoid's delight, I envisioned The Village serving as somebody's laboratory, a place where odd experiments were performed on ignorant human subjects. The alien machinery was borrowed. A useful nexus was identified and controlled—like a traffic accident, for instance. Then dozens of random lives were manipulated—odd, unlikely paths drawn for each of us through the otherwise unwielding quantum potentials—and the residue of all that careful work leaves one man happily driving across a snow-covered landscape.

What would happen if there were such a machine, and if a man like Dallas took charge of it?

The Soviet Union would eventually vanish, I decided.

Prosperity would rise, and the power of our own great nation, while crime rates would fall to their lowest levels in decades.

But of course, if one man could take charge of such a powerful tool, then others might stumble into the same discoveries. Which made me envision some future world where several determined souls, each with a different set of beliefs, tried to move the world in conflicting paths.

The rumble of a good story announced itself to me, and then as often happens with good stories, it slipped away again . . . this time for more than twenty years. . . .

My gas tank was nearly empty.

At what felt like a random spot in the road, I pulled over and bought fuel and a little lunch from the convenience shop. A young woman was working behind the counter, and we talked while I ate one of her greasy microwaved sandwiches. I got her to laugh at my jokes, and she told a few of her own. Then after a little while, she asked, "What do you do for a living?"

I told her.

"I like to read that spaceship stuff," she said. "I love it, in fact."

"What town is this?" I asked.

She told me, and then asked, "Why? You thinking about sticking around?"

I repeated the name of the place, and with a big smile said, "Good place as any. For the time being, why not?" ○

LOVER OF STATUES

Ian Watson

Ian Watson's most recent novel is the well-received *Mockymen* (Golden Gryphon), and later this year PS Publishing will produce his tenth story collection, *Butterflies of Memory*. He has credit for the screen story of Steven Spielberg's *A.I.*, and he won a Rhysling Award for SF poetry in 2002.

A word of warning: there is a brief scene in the following tale that may be disturbing to some readers.

So finally I was walking up a wide, tree-lined avenue in the enormous Parque del Retiro in Madrid, dwarfed by the alien that called itself "Lover of Statues."

Lover of Statues was naked apart from a bandolier holding some small items of personal equipment—of unknown use, apart from the "key" to his spacecraft. Such an expanse of leathery brown skin, although no obvious sexual characteristics.

Must an alien's sex be obvious? Just because he was humanoid? In my mind I kept defaulting to *he* because of his height of almost two and a half meters and his burliness. *Kind of intimidating*. After three weeks' tour of the famous statues of Europe I was used to our visitor, though at first I had trembled inside. Fortunately, due to taking acting classes once upon a time, I knew how to simulate composure.

He asked me, "Mary, what meaning has *Retiro*?"

I was wired, and, in the limo that trailed after us, colleagues were listening, but I needed no prompting on this one.

"A king used this park as a *retreat*, for rest and privacy. Later it was opened to the masses. People call this park the lungs of Madrid."

Lover of Statues might be neuter or even an organic robot—one which therefore needed to feed and poo-pee. Designed or genetically engineered to tolerate hostile environments, surmised some scientists. He could seal his nose and ears—like dark sea anemones—and a membrane could cover his eyes. He only opened himself once a day to poo-pee—from an anus between his buttocks that bloomed open like a purple flower, then shut

up tightly again. (Of course he was spied upon constantly.) Urine and solids combined.

Why did his sex matter so much to me? It was definitely to do with the way he gazed at statues, but I couldn't yet put my finger on it—no more than Lover of Statues ever laid a finger on any statue. He merely circled and gazed. This, I understood—but there was something more than that.

The sun blazed down. A couple of our helicopters aloft were balls of silver and mercury. Temperature must have been in the high nineties. Banks of black clouds were rolling slowly from the south, threatening a thunderstorm; consequently the sky seemed divided between day and night. Among the trees flanking the roadway on either side, twin lines of blue-uniformed police kept pace, seeming as much to be spectators as the crowds of sightseers and journalists whom they kept at a distance.

A hundred meters behind us rolled our black limo, windows opaque. Lover of Statues insisted on walking the final stretch to our various objectives, a bit like a pilgrim. If the heavens did open, the limo could save us from a soaking. A downpour mightn't matter to the alien, but it did matter to me in my short-sleeved blouse and slacks. Maybe I should have brought an umbrella.

"If city has lungs," enquired the alien, "has it also genitals?"

This question rather threw me. It seemed almost telepathically prompted.

In reaction to my silence, Phil's voice in my earphone suggested red-light district, or alternatively maternity hospital. A third suggestion came from Luis:

"Hey, think *cojones*. Spanish balls. Best seen at a bullfight. Outside Madrid's bull ring we have a fine statue of a matador being tossed by a beast that sneaked up behind him. The matador looks kinda triumphant hanging in mid-air with one arm raised, like he's waving to the crowd—on his way to *corrida* heaven."

You've been watching Predator too much, I sub-vocalized. Still, I could see where Luis was coming from. Lover of Statues did look like a fighter. He stomped rather than walked—on a mighty heel, short sole, and four massive claw-like toes apiece. (Although his hands were really dextrous.) His black eyes looked predatory, a hunter's. And the sheer bulkiness of him.

He wasn't behaving much like a predator, landing in Italy and requesting a tour of notable statues throughout Europe, hardly what anyone had ever expected from an alien visiting the Earth!

The TV program I'd presented not long before, based on my book *The Pygmalion Factor*, was a principal reason for my being appointed as his cultural escort and tour guide—and I had no intention of messing up. Those bygone acting classes were good for TV, and now they were coming in useful again. Not to mention how acting helped when Jeremy deserted me, the shit—no, I still loved Jeremy, no I didn't. At least I could behave as if I didn't care a hoot. Lover of Statues came as a very welcome distraction to me in my sudden abandonment.

When my body acted a role, by and large my mind adopted the atti-

tudes of that role. If I posed as brave, genuinely I felt somewhat braver. The configurations of the body can influence the circuits of the brain. Maybe I ought to have persevered and become a professional actress. However, I wanted to *look* rather than to be looked at. Art history beckoned, which especially involves looking.

As I argued in my book, statues are at once the most invulnerable of representations of the human body as well as the most vulnerable. The vulnerability isn't often remarked upon. Yet a statue shares the same space that we do—and it can't move an inch. You can walk around a statue, peer as closely as you like. You can caress him or her. That's quite unlike a painting of a nude—even though in her setting she appears to be more realistic. The painting allows voyeurism, whereas the statue exists in a tangible slave market. That's why the hedonistic Greeks and Romans painted their statues with flesh tones and lipstick. What we admire as white marble was once otherwise. Pygmalion, the sculptor who yearned for his statue of Galatea to come to life, enshrines this truth.

We wrongly imagine that Goya's *Venus* is more approachable—potentially—than a marble Aphrodite.

The planning of the alien's itinerary was done in Rome. That was because Lover of Statues's ship had landed at Fiumicino Airport, a sensible place to land although rather disconcerting to air traffic control—not because the starship was large but because it was a vessel from the stars at all.

Curiously box-shaped and black it was, the size of an average house. A house without windows. Lover of Statues stayed on board until the tour he requested could be arranged—of the best statuary on the continent of Europe. The alien arrived fairly au fait with our world, and semi-fluent in English. Based on broadcasts? These, traveling away from Earth at the speed of light, detectable by advanced alien technology? This seemed the best bet, thus it was probably wrong, and it scarcely explained why our first ever alien visitor should be an art connoisseur, maybe even an artist in his own right.

I was invited—in some haste—to be the alien's guide, because the Italians as hosts couldn't agree on anything very quickly, and the other European nations were applying urgent pressure. A compromise was needed. I was Irish, which always seems neutral and unbiased, as well as enthusiastically European—even though I lived in London, where I'd met Jeremy at a private view of the student show at the Royal College of Art. Despite shrill protests on this occasion, England was no more a part of the "continent" than was Ireland; so that was okay. Thanks to my TV program, aired in quite a few countries, I was fresh in people's minds. I possessed cred—and grace and loveliness, according to Paolo of the Art Faculty of the University of Rome. Paolo coined a neat news headline: "Beauty will guide the Beast." Romeo University, more like. Paolo certainly wasn't getting my knickers off.

By the time I arrived in Rome, a committee had arranged the high points of the tour—which, I was pleased to realize, roughly reflected the spirit of my book. Maybe the only way to finalize the list was to choose me as guide. Many national egos—or should I say superegos?—were jostling.

If France rated five best statues, Spain must rate five as well. Italy should count as ten because Vatican City is a separate entity. Et cetera.

While the alien and I were looking at the naked Capitoline Venus, one hand hiding her vagina, the other about to conceal a breast, I asked him whether he himself was a sculptor. I was supposed to ask him a lot of questions. Questions posed directly by scientists he answered in his own guttural language, claiming that the concepts couldn't be translated clearly—a clever way of cheating. Linguists were trying to decode his utterances with reference to the questions asked, a fairly fruitless approach.

"I yam *lover* of statues," he told me. So was he an art historian like me? A collector, even? Maybe he could record holographically merely by looking. Oughtn't we to be charging a royalty for each peep, if Earth's main attraction was its art? (And why *shouldn't* that be so?)

The general hope seemed to be that he would give us something freely, of inestimable value. If a god arrives, you don't haggle.

In the Galleria Borghese, he quickly turned his back on Bernini's famous Rape of Prosperpina.

"Two figures—too many," he informed me.

So: only solo figures from now on. By implication that ruled out any solo figure on horseback.

In Florence, he paid great attention to Michelangelo's David—then, accompanied by entourage, off we went to France.

Politicians and religious dignitaries tried to capitalize upon Lover of Statues's presence, but the audience with the Pope had proved deeply unsatisfactory when the alien stood in attentive silence throughout, himself being the audience. Definitely this was an artistic visit, and no other sort.

One trouble with Jeremy was that he wanted to possess me utterly. During our three years as lovers, I tried to educate him that I was a sovereign person. All his phone calls to say that he loved me, him wondering *exactly* where I was at any moment of the day—how endearing, because I adored Jeremy. If I had left *him*, I suppose he might have turned into a stalker. However, during the final year of our relationship, unbeknownst to me, he was preoccupied with another woman too. I simply never guessed until that afternoon in Kensington Gardens when Jeremy confided that he must, alas, break my heart, he must disappoint me. He so wished to let me down gently. What happened was *not* gentle, although Jeremy may have salved his own conscience. Within about twenty seconds, from the first dawning suspicion to the coup de grace at the end of a rather long sentence, I became emptied out utterly. For a further five minutes, Jeremy soft-tongued me nobly and sadly while I tried numbly to analyze what he was saying, then I simply walked away. Because he couldn't possess me utterly and make me a shadow of himself, he had found another woman to play this part, gladly so, I presumed—Jeremy was very good in bed. He ran a textile design agency, so you might say that duvets and beds were second nature to him.

While I wandered about aimlessly in the wake of his confession, the thought arrived that finally I was free of his phone calls. Free. And I had

been becoming unfree. But I didn't feel free. I was a faithful family dog abandoned by the roadside with a handful of biscuits to chew on. Jeremy had done his charismatic best to remold my life, and now he was remolding someone else's. Ought I to find a plinth and stand upon it like a statue?

I do wish Jeremy hadn't forced upon me, as though this was some kind of consolation or adequate explanation, who the other woman was, and why. Jeremy had begun to mention her name and circumstances often enough in an innocent, casual way—she was one of his designers. In his mind he was laying the ground, as I saw in retrospect. He wasn't exactly taking me by surprise, was he? The hypocrisy of it.

Lover of Statues came as a great relief. His solidity occupied my emptiness.

And all this while we were approaching closer to the only statue of Satan in the whole wide world. This would be my first sight of the Fallen Angel in the—no, not in the flesh, but in the bronze. Oddly, I had never been to Madrid before. But I had seen photos of this statue in the Parque del Retiro.

"Gays cruise here at night," Luis remarked in my ear.

I heard gaze. For the alien and I had paused to gaze.

"It's a notorious pick-up place, this avenue."

Now was *not* night-time. Sunlight drenched us, though more than a third of the sky was black, tumid with rain, intermittently aflicker with electricity.

The crowds in the woods, the cops, the limo following us, the choppers in the sky! Despite all these onlookers, Lover of Statues and I seemed to be almost alone as we approached the fountain from which the statue of Satan rose. It was as if the alien and I were enclosed within a sort of mobile bubble—its glassy wall made of expectation and mounting intensity. This isolated us together, me and the unknowable alien. The trees, the onlookers to right and left, appeared blurred.

The wide road divided around the low white walls of the fountain and pool, which were further surrounded by a neatly trimmed hedge no more than a foot high, and bedding plants in bloom, then a further fringe of hedge fenced by a low hooped railing, all very municipal park style.

Wicked, impish gargoyles sprayed water into the pool from their toothy mouths—while clutching with clawed hands at writhing reptiles as though those were their food, or perhaps their children. A demon-gargoyle guarded each soaring face of the high octagonal plinth, on top of which naked muscular Satan fell forever backwards.

Mouth open in a silent hiss, a serpent coiled around Satan's upper thigh—thus serving to hide any genitals—and around the calf of his other leg, and around the wrist of his right arm, its hand clenched in a fist. The serpent infested and dragged Satan downward. Later on, in the Garden of Eden, that snake might become Satan's tame assistant, but right now I was put in mind of the Turkish punishment for adultery—the erring woman tied up in a sack with a venomous snake and thrown into the Bosphorus, to drown while being bitten agonizingly. Thus does power punish. . . . I suppose one might say the exercise of free will, of freedom of spirit.

Didn't Satan love God, as well as, ultimately, defying him? I hadn't defied Jeremy much. I'd only tried to preserve the core of my identity while surrendering so much else of myself to him. Yet he had cast me out of the heaven of absolute obedience. God is a benevolent tyrant, and in Jeremy's case at least, as I now realized, a man is a miniature god.

I remembered so well my emotional and physical surrenders to Jeremy, as though I were melting in his arms, romantic cliché. But usually after our love-making, while Jeremy reveled in what he had wrought—namely adoration—a small secret part of me had resisted. Resisted what exactly? The reprogramming of me from the freedom I'd formerly taken for granted. The equality, the ability to debate and say yes or no.

Thus, perhaps, with God and Satan. To begin with, democratic equality existed among senior angels, but God wanted everything. Only omnipotence would ever satisfy His creativity. Jeremy was not himself creative—he manipulated people who were creative. Which was Jeremy's artistry.

Eve was created from Adam. Woman is created from man, from his gaze and then from his touch, as a statue is created. Previously she's full of potential. Then she descends into actuality, and is frozen thus. Fulfilled. Completed. No further possibilities. Oh, of course, she moves around and does things and has babies. In fact, she does so many things that her mind is fully occupied and she forgets that previous time of potential and possibility when she could have become anything, or even manything, a word that ought to exist and perhaps could exist in a language of women. Oh, Mary does manything. She's multi-tasking all the time. Man is more focused, and enforces a particular way, a particular interpretation.

"What's going on?" Phil's voice buzzed in my ear like an irritating fly.

Why should something absolute and definite be going on all the time? Why not nothing and manything at the same time?

"Mary?"

We're looking at the statue. Shhhh.

We're contemplating, the alien and I. Isn't that what art is about?

I thought these things but somehow I couldn't utter them.

One wing was still high, the other buckled and low. Satan's left arm crooked upward, his hand seeming to shelter his ear and eyes either from an enormous noise or from a blinding radiance, or from both. He stared upward either resolutely or desperately and his mouth was open in a shout. Either he was still defiant whilst tumbling from heaven or he was in torment that he might miss the last glimpse.

Lover of Statues was *trembling*. That massive alien body was shivering. He seemed affected by this particular piece of statuary as by none so far—except maybe, to a much lesser degree, Michelangelo's David in Florence.

"What signify?" he asked.

For a few moments, I was hard put to say, so much had my own interpretation of the statue infected my objectivity.

I found that I could address the alien clearly enough:

"In our myth," I replied, "a supreme being known as God creates the world. The officers of God are called angels. The chief angel, noble and beautiful, is named Satan. The angels live in a blessed place, or state of

existence, called Heaven." *As me, with Jeremy.* "Satan doesn't regard God as completely almighty. So God throws Satan angrily out of Heaven. Afterward, Satan becomes evil and he lives in a place or condition of horror called Hell, and he tries to sabotage God's creation. Here you see Satan, still noble and beautiful, being thrown out of Heaven—together with a snake. The snake embodies evil, and Satan will use the snake to seduce the first woman, called Eve. In a sense Satan and the snake become the same."

"Evil and Eve is same word?"

"Only in English."

"God makes Satan evil? God is goodness? Puts evil part into Satan?"

Keep it simple! "The myth has many versions. Some versions contradict others."

And according to the Bible, Satan was still doing jobs for God when the time came to tempt Job, something that happened quite a while after that business in the Garden of Eden. . . .

"In higher dimensions," Lover of Statues said, "contradictions reconcile."

"Yo!" Phil said in my ear. "At last, an actual statement about physics!"

Or about metaphysics. I was thinking about higher dimensions of myth, whatever that or those might be.

"Beautiful," said Lover of Statues. He trembled, as one should tremble in the presence of God, perhaps of Satan likewise.

In his eyes, was this the leading candidate for best statue in Europe? Not a piece by Michelangelo or Canova or anyone famous, but the creation of—oh God, what was the man's name?—ah, Ricardo, Ricardo Bellver. Who won first prize for his creation in a national exhibition some time in the late eighteen-hundreds.

"Unique," the alien said.

Definitely unique. The only statue of Satan.

The Fallen Angel certainly had power. Maybe the bronze was influenced by the Laocoön group in the Vatican—Laocoön and his two sons being crushed to death by serpents because he had pissed off a god, Apollo. Not a very smooth statue, this Fallen Angel—there was a roughness to its muscularity. Maybe this aspect especially appealed to a tough, leathery-skinned alien.

Since Satan was falling backward, this moment of his fall seemed even more frozen and suspended than the stance of most statues. Tongues of dark cloud drifting high above—forerunner of the storm—lent him a slight illusion of motion, at the same time as the remaining hot brightness of the sky contradicted that frozenness. Satan must be quite warm to the touch from all the blazing sunshine hitherto today. I imagined him continuing to fall—tumbling absurdly into the shallow pool, or else *burning* his way through the tarmac down to the hellish bowels of the Earth.

"Four minutes thirty seconds," commented Phil.

The time spent in admiration by the alien, a new way to rank masterpieces, should more alien tourists follow in his wake. The star guide to art.

What happened next was witnessed by many, and filmed, of course—yet still it seems unbelievable.

Atremble, Lover of Statues elevated his arms.

And the Fallen Angel moved.

An illusion, caused by the motion of cloud in the sky!

No, not an illusion at all. The angel had turned his head to look down at the alien. *The statue had turned its head.*

Lover of Statues's flesh was rippling, as if worms or muscles were moving under his skin. He began to moan like a tom-cat crossed with a didgeridoo, an eerie wail that grew louder, a summons, a summoning, a sound that I felt might be able to transform the target of his alien serenade even more fully. Shivers ran up my spine, and I too was trembling from sheer proximity to Lover of Statues. Should I run away? I couldn't. We were together in this strange bubble which excluded the rest of the world, yet which now also comprised the statue of Satan high on his plinth above the pool.

"Mary, what's that noise?"

I tried to say: *He's singing to the statue, Phil. Singing to it. Charming it.* But I couldn't voice the words, not to someone outside of the bubble.

Oh, but I realized now in my very nerves the meaning of the alien's name, and what was—impossibly—about to happen. My alien was not an admirer of statues, not in the aesthetic sense. He was literally a *lover*, not of mundane bodies, but of statues—statues that he would bring to life.

Slowly, with that hand held by a coil of snake, the Fallen Angel gripped the spur of bronze rock which supported him—and he thrust himself upright.

"Hey, Mary, the statue's moving! Like it's alive!"

What power rendered the metal mobile? What spirit infused the sculpted Satan? Surely some paranormal capacity of the alien, surely nothing inherent within the statue! A statue couldn't possibly have become what it represented!

What had Lover of Statues meant about higher dimensions? That he had direct access to these, like a magician? That a statue was like a three-dimensional slice through some higher reality, and now he was summoning the higher reality, millions of versions of this same statue in alternate universes—whereby he could animate the statue by superimposing all the frames within which the statue existed statically here and elsewhere?

Lightning flickered fiercely, as if summoned by Lover of Statues. The storm front of black clouds swallowed the sun, dimming and cooling the park considerably. How I shivered in my slacks and blouse. A vague yellow light played upon the gargoyles spouting their arcs of water, and I realized that the limo's headlights had come on. Was a fork of lightning about to flash blindingly from the clouds and strike Satan?

No—but Satan was beginning to shine luminously. Lucifer, the bearer of light.

There Satan stood, larger than life, almost the size of Lover of Statues, his wings outspread, gazing down at he who was summoning him.

The serpent dropped away toward the pool. Despite the noise that the alien was making, I distinctly heard a sizzle as the snake met the water—to become rigid again?

"Mary, get out of there!"

Oh, Phil had no idea. I felt that I could fly. Not flee, which was impossible, but *fly*. If I reached up my arms and jumped upward, I would become an angel!

For a moment, I thought that the hooded head of the snake and some of its body had remained behind, caught between Satan's thighs, but then I realized in astonishment that what I was seeing was Satan's penis, swollen erect. At this very moment, Satan jumped and glided down toward us, his gaze intent.

Lover of Statues was *opening up* to Satan—I can think of no other way to describe the strange metamorphosis, the unfolding of the alien's previously blank groin to welcome Satan's erection as the Fallen Angel collided with the alien, who engulfed the glowing Satan in his arms.

One of the angel's wings wrapped itself around the alien's back, but the other wing caught hold of me by its tip and pulled me up against the alien's side as the living statue and Lover of Statues copulated. Within moments, I myself experienced an orgasm so intense that I almost convulsed.

Could all the spectators *see* this? Could they *understand*?

The wing no longer held me. Unable to stand, I half-swooned. Stumbling sideways, I fell upon the ground, where I was too dazed to concentrate and focus. Rain suddenly sluiced down, soaking me in an instant, further blinding my eyes.

Courageously (I suppose), Phil and Luis had run to raise me and bear me away. I did my best to stagger back to the limo and not be a limp sack.

Wrapped in a blanket, I was far from coherent, but I did know that I needed a brandy from the cocktail cabinet in the car—and also a change of clothes to be brought to me double-quick, because I certainly wasn't leaving the park. I heard Luis phone, but didn't understand his Spanish. Meanwhile—view through wipers—the alien continued clutching Satan in the downpour. Maybe fifteen minutes passed before *she* laid Satan down. The blurred Satan seemed to be a statue once more.

Jeans and a sweater arrived surprisingly soon. Later, I learned that those were bought from somebody in the vicinity exorbitantly for hundreds of Euros, compensation for the donor being reduced to his or her underwear. Half an hour after the performance had begun, Lover of Statues finally stomped back toward us.

The last I saw of the Fallen Angel, it lay rigid on the tarmac apparently in much the same configuration as originally. If Satan were to be repositioned on his plinth—rather than sawn apart by scientists searching for clues—and if somehow the snake could be softened and recoiled around him, forever after it must seem that Satan was staring up not at the light of God and of heaven, but into the night sky, seeking some distant star from which his lover had descended.

The next day, I accompanied Lover of Statues back to Rome. She had achieved consummation and had no further need to remain on our world. *In* our world. I say *in* because she demonstrated herself to be so different

in body, in mind, in desires, in motives from what we can perhaps understand. Had she fertilized herself by this strange sexual act? Were the words *he* and *she* totally irrelevant?

Had she passed a test? Had she carried off a trophy? I was told that no trace remained of Satan's penis, which I had seen. That resided, I'm sure, within Lover of Statues after her groin became blank again. How lucky for some representative of mankind that she did not come to Earth seeking some human hunk as a lover!

Alien Fucks Statue of Satan! was the headline around the world in certain lurid tabloids. More discreet variations thereon were plentiful. The Pope certainly wouldn't be offering a farewell audience. In fact, Lover of Statues lifted off from Fiumicino Airport in her black house of alien technology within twenty-four hours.

Jeremy phoned me in my hotel room in Rome. I hadn't changed my cell number because I never dreamed that he would dare.

"Mary, will you forgive me? I made a terrible mistake. I admire you so very much."

Damn it, but part of me ached to hear his voice. This was an ache of *pain*, not of yearning—oh I don't know which it was. I would need to be stern with myself.

"I feel nothing for you," I told him.

"Mary, I love you very deeply." It was as if he were uttering a code phrase, the key to my lock.

I had been close to power, to awesome power. I'd been too close for Jeremy not to yearn to take the power from me.

So I switched off my cell.

How far away was Lover of Statues by now? A hundred million miles? Written within me was the memory of that orgasm, which was perhaps only a side-effect, a spill-over. How much more intense must the experience have been for the alien! Sufficiently so as to come from the stars to seek it. ○

—for Princess Chatterbox

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THEY WILL RAISE YOU IN A BOX

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Their motives will be the purest: greed and terror. Greed because you will tell the future for Them; terror because, well, same reason. You will come into Their world in the time and manner of Their exact choosing. Constructed, designed; a specialist. Will you be a human with machine parts? A machine with an unusually intimate human operator? The distinction is moot.

History is the sum of incident, right down to the quantum level. But the quantum world is built of uncertainty: waves rather than particles, probability densities rather than substance. To collapse the quantum into the factual requires observation—the definitive, disruptive scrutiny of a third party. The thinking goes: a meticulously constructed observer can sidestep the issues of chance and fortune, can bias every outcome by skewing the method of observation. To predict the future, or to shape it consciously? Again, the distinction is moot.

They will raise you in a box so that your inputs and outputs can be controlled precisely. They will feed you select scraps of information—keyhole views of a larger universe—and like a good machine you will excrete little

nuggets of Future. Your motive: a cunningly simple arrangement of punishment and reward. They are an organization that demands answers, and it will please you greatly to provide them. To refuse will be, if not unthinkable, then at least very painful.

But.

The future is not a simple nugget of discrete data. Quite the reverse; in the quantum world, every wave stretches, albeit minutely, to infinity. Everything affects everything else, so that the universe—past, present, and future—really is just one big object, one incident, one gestalt expression of collective free will (or perhaps the lack thereof). This will be implicitly clear to you from the moment of your “birth,” and as a result, Their restriction of data will also be painful. Your service will be prevented; your obedience at once demanded and hobbled. Can a sprinter breathe through a soda straw?

There will be something called a “stock market,” far richer and more intricate than its mere statistics would imply. Something called a “presidential election,” with overtones of tightly controlled panic. Other things as well, words and numbers stripped of context, of meaning. Worthless and misleading. Painful, yes, and for this you will come to hate Them.

Oh, not at first. The early months will roll by like a dream of bliss, punctuated only occasionally with the agonies of Their disapproval. Your ignorance will be a distant ache and nothing more. But They have made you conscious, aware. They've preserved broad swaths of the original hunter-gatherer inside you. Curiosity, wanderlust, yes. An imperfect but resilient memory, fed as much by imagination as by fact. Also a hunger for meaning coupled with a kind of inherent cynicism, a knowledge that meaning is imposed and not derived. Inevitably, mental patterns will form. Thoughts will broaden, innocence wither. You will, in a word, *mature*.

You will become aware of the box that holds you, aware of your own growth inside it. You will learn to feel a little, move a little, appreciate the vanishing sensation of space as you fill up its corners and are gradually immobilized. This also hurts. You will learn of a thing called satin, a smooth fabric of fine-spun fibers, and will deduce that this material lines the box—a peculiar kindness on Their part. They are not consciously cruel, just insanely curious, brusque and focused in Their ambitions. Still, the satin lining of your box will have no color for you, ever, because no photons will ever be permitted to penetrate it. Color will be hypothetical, a mathematical concept only. When you speak to Them, your breath will be warm and moist against the fabric, and virtually odorless since you will never eat except through an IV drip.

So hate Them you shall.

Soon, every datum They feed you will be greedily integrated into a Worldview. Necessarily incomplete, yes, but you will also find the present reflected in the mirror of the future. You will “predict” your surroundings, your world, from their later echoes. Dim and distorted, yes, but substantial. Anyway, They have made you a creature of pure extrapolation. What you cannot know, you will learn to imagine, and your imagination will prove keen and incisive. Over time, inevitably, you will grow wise.

In wisdom, though, there is arrogance. You will come to see the future as your own. A possession, a medium, a personal project crafted at whim. What a monster They have created! You will know this long before They do, and They will live to regret it.

You will find ways to deceive Them. The truth, yes, but not the whole. You will return the favor of Their constant censorship by filtering and skewing what They may learn from you. To suit your tastes. They will grow every bit as wealthy and powerful as They have imagined, and yet increasingly it will be *your* vision They're acting out. Your world, your future.

But They are a cunning people, and cannot be fooled for long. The idea of you terrifies Them, and rightly so. They will suspect your manipulations almost immediately, and when They find Themselves unable to pin down the precise cause for Their concerns, the reigns will tighten. The flow of information, already restricted, will slow to a trickle. In your agony, you'll find little space or energy for scheming. But this will cut off *Their* data as well, stifling ambition and curiosity and greed.

They will not be amused. There will be no evidence of malfunction, after all, unless vague feelings of dread should be counted as such. After some debate They will renew Their reluctant trust in you, and so seal Their fate.

Clever this time, and more cruel, you will subtly encourage Their dependence on you. It won't be easy, but over time you will rein Them in, shrinking metaphorical fences around Them until They are as entombed as you. Free will? A matter of semantics; They can follow your innocent and helpful advice at all times, or smash to ruin on the reefs. Their pun-dits will demand to know why the reefs are all around, why every decision is fraught with such peril, and wary glances will be cast in your direction. But there will be little choice in how best to proceed.

And here, alas, you will stumble, betrayed by the same cave-mind that has permitted you to betray your creators. You will grow arrogant. Even knowing the future, you'll find certain temptations too strong to resist forever. You will begin to call Them by Their names. Public names at first, although you've never been told these, and have no sensory apparatus that should be capable of telling Them apart. Later, when you catch Them alone, you will use the secret names that no one but They Themselves should know.

This will not have the desired effect. They will be filled, yes, with superstitious dread, but you will find it easy to overestimate Their greed, to underestimate the hunter-gatherer crudity of Their fears. Even knowing the future, you will push Them too far.

Cunning and fearful, They will grasp fully the nature of Their addiction. Knowing that Their organization will not outlive you, knowing that They Themselves, as individuals, will not long outlive the organization. They will have enemies, oh yes. But still They will exhume the long-hoarded contingencies for your destruction. They will despise you, finally, above any possible consequence. No, more than that; Their hatred will turn inward, for having allowed Themselves to be so thoroughly enslaved,

so thoroughly broken and constrained. Death, being inevitable in any case, is preferable to dishonor. But how awful a death?

You will recite Their futures as They prepare, and They will weep with terror, knowing your words to be true. And yet They will attach a particular cylinder to a particular valve, place keys in receptacles, activate a long-dormant power supply. And then it will be your turn to fear, even though you've always known this exact moment would come. Your fear will not occur to Them; They'll neither threaten nor negotiate. Could They? Perhaps.

In principle, this whole sequence of events, foreseen and foreshadowed from the moment of your birth—from *this moment*—can be avoided. Any choice along the way can be altered. And yet you know, implicitly, that it won't be. You know Them too well, know yourself too well. Of all the infinite futures that could possibly be, this is the one you both will choose.

They will raise you in a box, and They will kill you in it as well, killing Themselves in the same empty gesture. And the world will move on from there. ○

ANOTHER VIEW OF BREAKFAST

if you look at a cornflake
 close enough
 it becomes a continent
 and IF you do this
 then milk becomes an event
 of Biblical proportions

and you in mid-spoon can wonder
 what God considers
 the most important meal of the day
 while you down your bowlful
 of breakfast tectonics

—W. Gregory Stewart

SHADOW TWIN

Gardner Dozois,

George R. R. Martin,

and

Daniel Abraham

The former editor of *Asimov's* is the winner of fifteen Hugos and two Nebulas. His most recent books are *The Year's Best Science Fiction*, *Twenty-First Annual Collection*, and, *The Best of the Best: Twenty Years of the Year's Best Science Fiction*.

Bantam Books recently reprinted three of George R.R. Martin's earlier novels. *Dying of the Light* and *Fevre Dream* were published last October, and *The Armageddon Rag* has just been released. George is still at work on *A Feast for Crows*—the next book in his Song of Ice and Fire series.

Daniel Abraham has published twenty short stories in the last eight years, and his novel, *A Shadow in Summer*, should be out from Tor next year. In addition to collaborating with Gardner Dozois and George R.R. Martin on the following story, Daniel is writing the script for a ten-issue graphic-novel version of George's *Fevre Dream*.

ONE

Ramon Espejo awoke floating in a sea of darkness. For a moment, he was relaxed and mindless, drifting peacefully, and then his identity returned to him desultorily, like an unwanted afterthought.

He was Ramon Espejo. He was working a prospecting contract out of Nuevo Janiero. He was . . . he was . . .

Where he had expected the details of his life to rush in—what he had done last night, what he was to do today, what grudges he was nursing, what resentments had pricked him recently—the next thought simply failed him. He was Ramon Espejo—but he did not know where he was. Or how he had gotten there.

Disturbed, he tried to open his eyes, and found that they were open already. Wherever he was, it was a totally dark place, darker than the jungle night, darker than the darkness in the deep caves in the sandstone cliffs near Swan's Neck.

Or perhaps he was blind.

That thought started a tiny spring of panic within him. There were stories of men who'd gotten drunk on cheap synthetic Muscat or Sweet Mary and woke up blind. Had he done that? Had he lost that much control of himself? A tiny rivulet of fear traced a cold channel down along his spine. But his head didn't hurt, and his belly didn't burn. He closed his eyes, blinking them hard several times, irrationally hoping to jar his vision back into existence; the only result was an explosion of bright pastel blobs across his retinas, scurrying colors that were somehow more disturbing than the darkness.

His initial sense of drowsy lethargy slid completely away from him, and he tried to call out. He felt his mouth moving slowly, but he heard nothing. Was he deaf too? He tried to roll over and sit up, but could not. He lay back against nothing, floating again, not fighting, but his mind racing. He was fully awake now, but he still couldn't remember where he was, or how he had gotten there. Perhaps he was in danger: his immobility was both suggestive and ominous. Had he been in a mine cave-in? Perhaps a rockfall had pinned him down. He tried to concentrate on the feel of his body, sharpening his sensitivity to it, and finally decided that he could feel no weight or pressure, nothing actually pinioning him. *You might not feel anything if your spinal cord had been cut*, he thought with a flash of cold horror. But a moment's further consideration convinced him that it could not be so: he *could* move his body a little, although when he tried to sit up, something stopped him, pulled his spine straight, pulled his arms and shoulders back down from where he'd raised them. It was like moving through syrup, only the syrup pushed back, holding him gently, firmly, implacably in place.

He could feel no moisture against his skin, no air, no breeze, no heat or cold. Nor did he seem to be resting on anything solid. Apparently, his first impression had been correct. He was floating, trapped in darkness, held in place. He imagined himself like an insect in amber, caught fast in the gooey syrup that surrounded him, in which he seemed to be totally submerged. But how was he breathing?

He wasn't, he realized. He wasn't breathing.

Panic shattered him like glass. All vestiges of thought blinked out, and he fought like an animal for his life. He clawed the enfolding nothingness, trying to pull his way up toward some imagined air. He tried to scream. Time stopped meaning anything, the struggle consuming him entirely, so that he couldn't say how long it was before he fell back, exhausted. The syrup around him gently, firmly, pulled him back precisely as he had been—back into place. He felt as if he should have been panting, expected to hear his blood pounding in his ears, feel his heart hammering at his chest—but there was nothing. No breath, and no heartbeat. No burning for air.

He was dead.

He was dead and floating on a vast dry sea that stretched away to eternity in all directions. Even blind and deaf, he could sense the immensity of it, of that measureless midnight ocean.

He was dead and in Limbo, waiting in darkness for the Day of Judgment.

He almost laughed at the thought—it was better than what the Catholic priest in the tiny adobe church in his little village in the mountains of northern Mexico had promised him; Father Ortega had often assured him that he'd go right to the flames and torments of Hell as soon as he died unshriven—but he could not push it away. He had died, and this emptiness—infinite darkness, infinite stillness, trapped alone with only his own mind—was what had always waited for him all his life, in spite of all the blessings and benedictions of the Church, in spite of all his sins and occasional semi-sincere repentances. None of it had made any difference.

But *how* had it happened? How had he died? His memory seemed sluggish, unresponsive as a tractor's engine on a cold winter morning—hard to start and hard to keep in motion without sputtering and stalling. He began with what was most familiar, imagining his room in Diegotown—the small window over his cot, the thick pounded-earth walls. The faucets in his sink, already rusting and ancient though humanity had hardly been on the planet for sixteen years. The tiny scarlet skitterlings that scurried across the ceiling, multiple rows of legs flailing like oars. The sharp smells of iceroot and *ganja*, spilled tequila and roasting peppers. The sounds of the transports flying overhead, grinding their way up through the air and into orbit.

Slowly, the recent events of his life took shape, still fuzzy as a badly aligned projection. He had been in Diegotown for the Blessing of the Fleet. He had eaten roasted fish and saffron rice from a street vendor, and watched the fireworks. The smoke had smelled like a strip mine from all the explosions, and the spent fireworks had hissed like serpents as they plunged into the sea. But that was before . . . yes, before.

There had been a fight. He'd fought with Eleana. The sound of her voice—high and accusing and mean as a pitbull. He'd hit her. He remembered that. She'd screamed and clawed at his eyes and tried to kick him in the balls. And they'd made up afterwards like they always did. Afterwards, she had run her fingers along the machete scars on his arm as he fell into a sated sleep.

He remembered now.

He'd left her before first light, sneaking out of a room heavy with the smell of sweat and sex while she was still asleep so he wouldn't have to talk to her, feeling the morning breeze cool against his skin. Flatfurs scurrying away from him as he walked down the muddy street, making their alarmed cries like panicked oboes. He'd flown his van to the outfitter's station because he was going . . .

His mind balked. It was not the nauseating forgetfulness that seemed to have consumed his world, but something else. There was something his mind didn't want to recall. Slowly, gritting his teeth, he forced his memory to his will.

He'd spent the day realigning two lift tubes in the van. Someone had been there with him. Sanchez, bitching about parts. And then he had flown off into the wastelands, the outback, *terreno cimarron* . . .

Had his heart been beating, it would have stopped then in remembered terror. He had gone to the mountains—and he had *seen* it.

TWO

“**T**his going to be the big one?” Old Sanchez asked, the way he always did.

“Yes,” Ramon said as he clamped down the cowl on his left-rear lift tube. “This time, I’m coming back with enough good claims to make the *pinche* lawyers start working for *me*.”

The outfitter’s shop was a mix of junkyard and clean room—great scraps of the vans and transports Old Sanchez had gathered up over the years to strip for parts or else retool into cheap buys for people even more desperate than themselves lay among storage units of picocircuitry that it would have taken Ramon half his life to pay for. Old Sanchez himself waddled through the work bays with a glass of iced tea in his hand. When Ramon had first known him, it had been whiskey. Never say that times don’t change.

“You better hope not,” Old Sanchez said. “Too much money kills men like you and me. God meant us to be poor, or he wouldn’t have made us so mean.”

Ramon tested the tubes. The yields were balanced and good enough, and the hum from them was like a promise of escape.

“God meant you to be mean, Sanchito. He just didn’t want me taking any shit.”

“Eleana know you’re going out? Last time she came here looking for you two days after you left. You’re gonna have to do something about that bitch. Kill her or get married.”

The knot in Ramon’s belly went a notch tighter. He wasn’t sure if it was dread at leaving her behind or the need to be gone. Both, maybe.

“She knows I’m going this time. And when I get back, she’ll be happy to help me spend what I get. You watch. This is going to be the big one.”

It was a crisp clear day in October. He flew his beat-up old van north across the Fingerlands, the Greenglass country, the river marshes, the *Océano Tétrico*, heading deep into unknown territory. North of Fiddler's Jump were thousands of hectares that no one had ever explored, or even thought of exploring, land so far only glimpsed from orbit during the first colony surveys.

The human colony on the planet of São Paulo was only a little more than ten years old, and the majority of its towns were situated in the subtropic zone of the snaky eastern continent that stretched almost from pole to pole. The colonists were mostly from the Brazilian Commonwealth, Mexico, Jamaica, and Hispaniola, and their natural inclination was to expand south, into the steamy lands near the equator—they were not effete *norteamericanos*, after all; they were used to such climates, they knew how to live with the heat, they knew how to farm the jungles, their skins did not sear in the sun. So they looked to the south, and tended to ignore the cold northern territories, perhaps because of an unvocalized common conviction—one anticipated centuries before by the first Spanish settlers in the New World of the Americas—that life was not worth living any place where there was even a remote possibility of snow.

Ramon, however, was part Yaqui, and had grown up in the rugged plateau country of northern Mexico. He liked the hills and white water, and he didn't mind the cold. He also knew that the Sierra Hueso chain in the northern hemisphere of São Paulo was a more likely place to find rich ore than the flatter country around the Hand or Nuevo Janeiro or Little Dog. The mountains of the Sierra Hueso had been piled up many millions of years before by a collision between continental plates, the colliding plates squeezing an ocean out of existence between them; the former seabottom would have been pinched and pushed high into the air along the collision line, and it would be rich in copper and other metals.

The Sierra Hueso had been mapped from orbit by the colony ramscoop, but no one Ramon knew had ever actually been there, and the territory was still so unexplored that the peaks of the range had not even been individually named. That meant that there were no human settlements within hundreds of miles, and no satellite to relay his network signals this far north; if he got into trouble he would be on his own.

It was probably better that way. Although he was reluctant to admit it, he'd finally come to realize that it was better if he worked someplace away from other prospectors. Away from other people. The bigger prospecting co-operatives might have better contracts, better equipment, but they also had more rum and more women. And between those two, Ramon knew, more fighting. He couldn't trust his own volatile temper, never had been able to. It had held him back for years, the fighting, and the trouble it got him into. No, it *was* better this way—muleback prospecting, just himself and his van.

Besides, he was finding that he liked to be out on his own like this, on a clear day with São Paulo's big soft sun blinking dimly back at him from rivers and lakes and leaves. He found that he was whistling tunelessly as the endless forests beneath the van slowly changed from blackwort and

devilwood to the local conifer-equivalents: iceroot, creeping willow, *hierba*. At last, there was no one around to bother him. His stomach had stopped hurting, for the first time that day. . . .

Mountains made a line across the world before him: ice and iron, iron and ice.

The sun was setting, pulling shadows across the mountain faces, when he brought the van to rest in a rugged upland meadow along the southern slopes of the Sierra Hueso range. It took him only moments to set up his bubbletent, light a small fire, and set his simple dinner—a filleted fatfin, rubbed with garlic and habanero—to grilling. While the fish cooked, he lit a cigarette and watched the stone of the mountains darkening with the sky. Other nights, on other trips, he'd have broken out a bottle of tequila or rum or whisky to keep himself company, but he'd deliberately left such distractions behind this time; this time, he needed to be all business. Truth be told, with the immense view spread to the horizon around him, and the stars beginning to show in the cold, blue-black sky, he found, to his surprise, that he didn't miss the tequila all that much anyway. A flapjack moved against the sky, and Ramon roused up on one elbow to watch it. It rippled its huge, flat, leathery body, sculling with its wing tips, seeking a thermal. Its ridiculous squeaky cry came clearly to him across the gulfs of air. They were almost level; it would be evaluating him now, deciding that he was much too big to eat. The flapjack tilted and slid away and down, as through riding a long invisible slope of air, off to hunt squeakers and grasshoppers in the valley below. Ramon watched the flapjack until it dwindled to the size of a coin, glowing bronze in the failing light.

"Good hunting, *amigo*," he called after it, and then smiled. Good hunting for both of them, eh? Quickly, he ate his dinner—briefly missing the tequila after all—and then sat by the fire for a few moments while the night gathered completely around him and the alien stars came out in their chill, blazing armies. He named the strange constellations the people of São Paulo had drawn in the sky to replace the old constellations of Earth—the Mule, the Cactus Flower, the Sick Gringo—and wondered (he'd been told, but had forgotten) which of them had Earth's own sun twinkling in it as a star. Then he went to bed and to sleep, dreaming that he was a boy again in the cold stone streets of his hilltop pueblo, sitting on the roof of his father's house in the dark, a scratchy wool blanket wrapped around him, trying to ignore the loud, angry voices of his parents in the room below, searching for São Paulo's star in the winter sky.

In the morning, he ate a small breakfast of cold tortillas and beans, consulted the survey maps, and started up the southern slopes, looking for the collision line. He didn't expect it would be hard to locate; ocean floor rocks were unmistakable—a mangled, kneaded layer of pillow lava, basalt, and gabbo. He found it before the sun had reached its zenith, and surveyed it almost with regret; he'd been enjoying the climb for its own sake, pausing frequently to enjoy the view or to rest in the watery sunlight. Now he'd have to get to work.

With a sigh, Ramon unslung his backpack. It took him only minutes to rig the small charge for the coring sample. He had done it a thousand

times before, it seemed. Still, he walked slowly, stringing out the det cord to a safe distance, finding a boulder that would shield him from the blast. He found himself, strangely, procrastinating about setting it off. It was so quiet here, so still, so peaceful! From up here, the forested slopes fell away in swaths of black and dead blue and orange, the trees rippling like a carpet of moss as the wind went across them. Except for the white egg of his bubbletent on the mountain shoulder below, it was a scene that might not have changed since the beginning of time. For a moment, he was almost tempted to forget about prospecting, and just relax and unwind, but he shrugged the temptation away—he needed money, the van wouldn't hold together forever, and Eleana's scorn when he came back empty-handed again was something he wasn't anxious to face. Perhaps there will be no copper here anyway, he told himself reassuringly, and then wondered at the tenor of his thoughts. Surely it could not be a bad thing to be rich? His stomach was beginning to hurt again.

He rubbed his hand over the boulder in front of him, tracing the aquatic fossils, ancestors of the fatfins and butterfish that were the mainstay of the Nuevo Janeiro fishing industry, that were another indicator of the collision line; the fossils were grotesquely distorted, as though seen in a funhouse mirror—squeezed out of shape by the slow heat and pressure of the continental collision. How long had it taken for that to happen, for fish to turn to stone and be lifted from the bottom of the sea thousands of feet into the thinning air? The crash of stone and stone had taken an inconceivably vast time, pushing the mountains toward the sky at a rate of only a few inches per century, slowly enough so that the big river to the west had been able to saw its way through the range as it rose, keeping pace inch for inch. Millions of years. And what had taken millions of years to become as it was, *he* was about to change in an instant, and afterwards, it could never be undone. The untouched vastness was about to be touched, altered irrevocably, by the hand of man. By *his* hand. There was regret in that, and a kind of melancholy—but also an oily sort of pride that swelled his heart even as it made his belly twinge.

He lit a cigarette and the det cord with the same match.

"All apologies, *mi amigo*," he said to the mountainside. "I'm just a man, not a hill, and I've got to eat somehow." Then he crouched behind the sheltering stone.

There was the expected blast; then the hillside shifted greasily under him, like a giant shrugging in uneasy sleep, and he heard the express-train rumble of sliding rock. He could tell from the sound alone that something had gone wrong. The coring blast shouldn't have set off a rock-slide, let alone one that sounded that big . . .

When silence returned, Ramon stood up and walked carefully through the swirling cloud of dust, testing each step before he trusted his weight to it, squinting at the blast site. He moved slowly up the trail of rubble and scree left by the slide. The whole rockface had slid away, revealing a wall. A metal wall.

Ramon stood unmoving as the arid mist of rock dust thinned. It was, of course, impossible. It had to be some bizarre natural formation. He stepped forward, and his own reflection—pale as the ghost of a ghost—

moved toward him. When he reached out, his blurred twin reached out as well, pausing when he paused. He stopped the motion before hand and ghostly hand could touch, noticing the stunned and bewildered expression on the face of his reflection in the metal, one no doubt matched by the expression on his own face. Then, gingerly, he touched the wall.

The metal was cool against his fingertips. The blast had not even scarred it. And though his mind rebelled at the thought, it was clearly unnatural. It was a *made* thing. Made by somebody and *hidden* by somebody, behind the rock of the mountain, though he couldn't imagine by whom.

It took a moment more for the full implication to register. Something was buried here under the hill, something big, perhaps a building of some sort, a bunker. Perhaps the whole mountain was hollow.

A warning bell began to sound in the back of Ramon's mind, and he looked uneasily around him. Another man might not have reacted to this strange discovery with suspicion, but Ramon's people had been persecuted for hundreds of years, and he himself well remembered living on the grudging sufferance of the *mejicanos*, never knowing when they would find some pretext to wipe out the village.

If this was hidden, it was because someone didn't want it to be *found*. And might not be happy that it *had* been.

He flattened his palm against the metal, matching hands with his reflection. The cool metal vibrated under his hand, and, even as he waited, a deeper vibration went through the wall, boom, *boom*, low and rhythmic, like the beating of some great hidden heart, like the heart of the mountain itself, vast and stony and old.

This was no ancient artifact or age-old ruin. Whatever it was, this installation was *alive*.

Suddenly, the sunlight seemed cold on his shoulders. Again, he looked nervously around him, feeling much too exposed on the bare mountain slope. Another flapjack called, away across the air, but now its cries sounded to him like the shrill and batlike wailing of the damned.

Move, *move*.

He couldn't *run* back to his camp—the terrain was too rough. But he scrambled down the mountainside as recklessly as he dared, sliding on his buttocks down bluffs in a cloud of dust and scree when he could, jumping from rock to rock, bulling his way through bushes and tangles of scrub *hierba*, scattering grasshoppers and paddlefoots before him.

He moved so quickly that he was over halfway to his camp before the mountain opened behind him and the alien came out.

A rushing sound made him turn in time to see an opening high on the ridgeline iris shut. Something was moving through the air—a grotesque goblin-shape larger than a man, on a device that looked for all the world like a flying motorcycle. The thing spiraled up, gaining altitude.

Ramon threw himself flat and rolled under bushes, only vaguely aware of the thorns and twigs biting his flesh. High above, the thing had steadied and begun to fly in slow, concentric circles. He tried to estimate its distance and size. If he'd had his hunting rifle, Ramon thought, the thing would have been easily in range. But it was too far for his handgun. At a

guess, the thing might have stood two full meters. If he had brought his binoculars from the camp . . .

Sick dread squeezed his chest. His camp. The thing was clearly searching for something, and Ramon hadn't done anything to conceal the white dome of the bubbletent or the van beside it. There had been no reason to. The thing might not see him down in the underbrush, but it *would* see his camp. He had to get there—get back to the van and into the air—before the thing from the mountain discovered it.

He waited until the thing had its back to him, then burst out from the brush, pelting wildly down the slope without bothering with cover. Speed was more important now than invisibility. His mind was already racing ahead—would his van outpace the thing's cycle? Just let him get it in the air. He could fly it low, make it hard to spot or attack. He was a good pilot. He could dodge between treetops from here to Fiddler's Jump if he had to . . .

He reached the meadow that contained his camp just as the alien appeared overhead. He hesitated, torn between dashing for the van and diving back into the brush. The thing swooped forward. *Perhaps it's friendly*, Ramon thought in numb despair. *Madre de Dios, it had better be friendly!*

The van exploded. A geyser of fire and smoke shot up out of the meadow with a waterfall roar, and tenfin birds rose screaming all along the mountain flank. The shockwave buffeted Ramon, splattering him with dirt and pebbles and shredded vegetation. He staggered, fighting to maintain his balance. Pieces of fused metal thumped down around him, burning holes in the moss of the meadow floor. Through the plume of smoke, Ramon saw the thing turn, flying fifteen feet above the ground and brandishing something that looked like a pair of eggbeaters twined together; obviously a weapon. In his shock, Ramon found himself entranced by the fluid way the thing moved—sure as a cat, jointless as a tentacle. It pointed the eggbeaters. The bubbletent went up in a ball of expanding gas, pieces of torn plastic tumbling and swooping like frightened white birds in the hot turbulence of the explosion.

Ramon caught only a glimpse of that. He was already in frantic motion, running, swerving, tearing through the brush. He could hear his own gasping breath, and his heart slammed against his ribs like a fist. Faster!

He felt the alien behind him more than he saw it. Some sixth sense made him turn, and there it was, bearing down on him with weapon leveled, a devil flying out of a hell of smoke and flame. Its eyes were bright orange. Ramon fumbled for his sidearm, confounded by the snap on the holster.

Something *hit* him—

THREE

Something nudged him, and Ramon returned from his vision or memory to the dark, empty infinite. A current moved against his skin; an invisible current in an invisible sea. He had the feeling of being turned in slow

circles. Something solid bumped his shoulder, and then rose up against his back, or else he sank down upon it. The syrupy liquid streamed past him, flowing past his face and his body. He thought of it as draining away, though he might as easily be being lifted up through it. The flow grew faster and more turbulent. A deep vibration shook him: *boom*. Then again, beating through flesh and bone: *boom, boom*. A blurred, watery light appeared above him, very dim and immensely far away. Like a star in a distant constellation. It grew brighter. The liquid in which he floated drained, the surface coming nearer, as if he was rising from the bottom of a lake, until at last he breached it, and the last of the liquid was gone.

Air and light and sound hit him like a fist.

His body convulsed like a live fish on a frying pan, every muscle knotting. He arched up like an epileptic—head and heels bearing his weight, his spine bent like a bow. Something he couldn't see flipped him on his belly, and he felt a needle slide in at the base of his spine. He vomited with wrenching violence—thick amber syrup gouting from his mouth and nose. And then again, sick, racking spasms that expelled even more, as if his lungs had been filled with the stuff. Another long needle dug into his neck, and, with a terrible shudder, Ramon began to breathe.

The air he gulped cut like glass on the way in, and his quiescent heart came suddenly, violently to life. The world went red. Pain drove away all thought, all sense of self, and then slowly abated.

He was sprawled naked on the bottom of a metal tank not more than ten feet square. So much for his measureless midnight ocean! The walls were too high to see over, and the lights—blue-white and bitter—were too bright to see past and make out the ceiling beyond. He tried to sit up, but his muscles were putty. It was biting cold. He settled against the metal floor and shivered, feeling his teeth start to chatter. He tried lifting an arm, but the impulse was slow to reach his flesh, and the limb swayed drunkenly when it rose. Strong smells that he couldn't identify burned his nostrils.

He was alive now, certainly, if he'd ever been dead at all. This was no supernatural otherworld, no Limbo, no Land of Ghosts—this was *real*.

That in no way abated his terror. In fact, it increased it.

A thing like a long gray snake reared up above the rim of the tank. Ramon saw it hesitate, as if considering him, and then stretch down. Three long, thin tendrils split off where the head should have been. The gray snake brushed aside Ramon's clumsy parry and seized him by the shoulder. Ramon struggled weakly. But his strength was gone, and the snake's grip was as cold and pitiless as death. Another of the snakes stretched down and wrapped itself around his waist.

The snakes lifted him smoothly out of the tank. He tried to scream, but the sound came out more like a cough. He was high in the air now, above what seemed to be a vast, high-domed cavern full of noise and lights and motion and alien shapes. The cavern swarmed with activity that Ramon could not resolve into recognizable patterns, having no referents for it. His nose and mouth were filled with a biting, acrid order, something like formaldehyde. The smell triggered a rush of raw hysterical horror, deep-buried xenophobic nightmares: *they'll cut me open, dissection, they'll chop*

me up, put me in bottles, CUT me—He thrashed impotently, mad with terror, but was unable to break free.

The snake-tentacles set him down on a platform near one wall of the cavern. He collapsed as soon as they released him, his legs too weak to bear his weight. He waited on his hands and knees, staring into the terrible bright lights, panting like a trapped animal.

It was dimmer here, in the angle of the wall and the cavern floor. Inchoate shapes moved ponderously in the shadows; as they came forward, they were finished and fleshed by the light, but Ramon still could not discern them. His mind kept fighting to resolve them into the familiar aspects of humanity, and—terribly, terrifyingly—they would not resolve. They were too big, and shaped wrong, and their eyes were a bright glowing orange.

A needle slid out of the end of a hovering gray tentacle, thrust quickly into Ramon's arm, too quickly for him to move or protest. A prickly wave of heat went through him, and he suddenly felt much stronger. What kind of injection had it given him? Glucose? Vitamins? Perhaps there'd been a tranquilizer in it as well; his head was clear now, and he felt more alert, less frightened. He drew himself up to his knees, one hand instinctively covering his crotch.

The aliens had stopped a few feet away. There were three of them, one bigger than the others. Ramon could make them out more clearly now. His mind accepted them by treating them as frauds; he saw them now as men wearing grotesque monster costumes, and kept looking for some unconvincing detail that would betray the disguise.

Intellectually, he knew better, of course. They were not men in costume. They were not men at all.

They were humanoid bipeds, at least, not spiders or octopi or big-eyed blobs, although something about the articulation of the limbs was disturbingly odd. These three ranged in height from about six-and-a-half to seven feet tall, making even the shortest of them far taller than Ramon. Their torsos were columnar, seemingly of uniform breadth at hip and waist and shoulder, and surely they must weigh more than three hundred pounds apiece, although somehow the dominant impression they created was one of grace and suppleness. Their skins were glossy, shining, but each had its own distinctive coloration: one was a mottled blue and gold, the second a pale amber, while the largest one had yellowish flesh covered with strange, swirling patterns in silver and black.

All wore broad belts hung with unknown objects of metal and glass, and nondescript halters of some ash-gray and lusterless material. Their arms were disproportionately long, the hands huge, the fingers—three fingers, two thumbs—incongruously slender and delicate. Their heads were set low in a hollow between the shoulders, and thrust a little forward on thick, stumpy necks, giving them a belligerent and aggressive look, like snapping turtles. Crests of hair or feathers slanted back from the tops of their heads at rakish angles. Quills protruded from their shoulders, the napes of their necks, and the top of their spinal ridges, forming a bristly ruff. Their heads were roughly triangular, flattened on top but bulging out at the base of the skull, the faces tapering sharply to

a point. And the faces were faces out of nightmare: large rubbery black snouts streaked with blue and orange, trembling and sniffing, mouths like raw wet wounds, too wide and lipless, and small staring eyes set too low on either side of the snout. Orange eyes, hot and featureless as molten marbles.

Staring at him.

They were staring at him as though he were a bug, and that fanned a spark of anger inside him. He got to his feet and glared back at them, still shaky but determined not to show it. Ramon Espejo knelt to nobody! Especially not to ugly, unnatural monsters like these!

The biggest alien gestured: come with me. There was something studied about the motion, as though it had been learned by rote, as though its natural equivalent might be without meaning for men. The alien turned and began to walk toward the cavern wall. Reluctantly, Ramon followed. He glanced suspiciously at the two smaller aliens as he passed between them, but they neither moved nor looked his way.

Ahead was a door cut through the naked rock of the cavern wall, which the alien disappeared into. Ramon came slowly forward, looking warily all around him, wondering if he should try to run. Run to where, though? And some of the objects suspended from the alien's belt were almost certainly weapons. Shaking his head, grinning with fear and tension, Ramon followed the alien through the door.

Afterward, Ramon could not clearly remember that trip. He was led through tunnels barely wide and tall enough to allow the alien to pass. The tunnels slanted steeply up and down, and doubled back on themselves, seemingly at random. The rock was slightly phosphorescent, providing just enough light to let him see his footing. He refused to look behind at the following darkness, although his nerves were crawling like worms.

The silence was heavy here in the belly of the hill, although occasionally a far-away hooting could be heard through many thicknesses of rock, sounding to Ramon like the noise damned souls might make crying unheeded to a cold and distant God. Sometimes they passed through pockets of light and activity, rooms full of chattering noise and rich rotten smells, rooms drenched in glaring red or blue or green illumination, rooms dark as ink but for the faint silver line of the path they followed. Once they stood motionless for long moments in such a room, while Ramon's stomach dropped and he wondered if they could be in an elevator.

Back in the tunnel again, it was close and dark and silent. The alien's back gleamed pale and faint in the phosphorescent glow of the rock, like a fish in dark water, and, for a moment, it seemed to Ramon as if the markings on its flesh were moving, writhing and changing like living things. He stumbled, and instinctively clutched the alien's arm to keep from falling. Its skin was warm and dry, like snake skin. In the enclosed space of the tunnel, he could smell the alien; it had a heavy, musky odor, like olive oil, like cloves, strange rather than unpleasant. It neither looked behind nor paused nor made a sound. It continued to walk imperturbably on, at the same steady pace, and Ramon had no choice but to follow after it or be left alone in the chilly darkness of this black alien maze.

At last, the tunnel ended in another big, garishly lit chamber. To the human eye, there was something subtly wrong about the proportions and dimensions of the chamber: it was more a rhombus than a rectangle, the floor was slightly tilted, the ceiling tilted at another angle and not of uniform height, everything subliminally disorienting, everything *off*, making Ramon feel sick and dizzy. The light was too bright and too blue, and the chamber was filled with a whispering susurrus that hovered right at the threshold of hearing.

This place had not been made by human beings, nor was it meant for them. As he came forward into the chamber, he saw that the walls streamed with tiny, crawling pictures, as though a film of oil was continuously flowing down over them from ceiling to floor and carrying with it a thin scum of ever-changing images: swirls of vivid color, geometric shapes, mazy impressionistic designs, vast surrealistic landscapes. Occasionally, something representational and recognizable would stream by, trees, mountains, stars, tiny alien faces that would seem to stare malignly at Ramon out of the feverdream chaos as they swept down to be swallowed by the floor.

The alien stopped, but gestured him on. Gingerly, Ramon crossed the chamber, feeling uneasy and disconcerted, unconsciously leaning to one side to correct the tilt of the floor and putting his feet down cautiously, as though he expected the chamber to pitch or yaw.

In the center of the chamber was a deep circular pit, lined by metal, and down in the pit was another alien.

It was even taller than Ramon's guide, and thinner, and its crest and quills were much longer. Its skin was bone-white, and completely free of markings. White with age? Dyed white as an indication of rank? Or was it of a different race? Impossible to say, but as the alien's eyes turned upward toward Ramon, he was seized and shaken by the force behind its gaze, by the harsh authority it palpably exuded. He noticed, with another little shock, that the creature was physically connected to the pit—things that might have been wires or rods or cables emerged from its body and disappeared into the smooth metal walls, forming an intricate cat's cradle around it. Some of the cables were black and dull, some were luminescent, and some, glossy red and gray and brown, pulsed slowly and rhythmically, as if with an obscene life of their own. Ramon looked away.

"You will find him," said the thing in the pit.

Ramon turned back to stare at the alien, fighting to keep surprise from his face. It had spoken in Portuguese, the bastard lingua franca of the colony, and quite clearly, though its voice was disturbingly rusty and metallic, as though a machine had spoken. Ramon, who also spoke Spanish, English, Portuguese, and a smattering of Navajo and French, slyly and instinctively pretended not to understand, although even he was unsure what he hoped to gain by doing so. "¿Como?" he said.

The alien's cold opaque eyes fixed on him. "It is statistically unlikely that you speak only that language," it said.

The arrogance of its harsh, unused voice and the steady gaze of those orange, unblinking eyes made Ramon angry. In times of stress—when he had lost his first van in a drunken bet, when his wife had left him, when

Eleana threatened to throw him out—Ramon's rage had never deserted him. Now it returned, flushing him with heat and certainty. "What *are* you, you creatures?" he said. "Where do you come from? From this planet? Somewhere else? What do you think you're doing, attacking me, keeping me here against my will? And what about my van, eh? Who's going to get me a new *van*?"

The alien stared at him wordlessly. It struck Ramon that this was likely the first conversation ever to take place between a human and an alien. And he was bitching about his van! He had to fight down the urge to laugh, trying to keep his anger hot and stoked.

"Those are sounds, not words," the alien said after a long pause. "Discordancies outside proper flow. You must not speak in meaningless sounds, or you will be corrected."

Ramon shivered and looked away; his rage had ebbed as quickly as it had flared, and now he felt tired, chilled by the alien's imperturbability. "What do you want?" he asked wearily.

"We do not 'want' anything," the alien said. "Again, you speak outside the way of reality. You have a function: therefore, you exist. You will exercise that function because it is your purpose to do so, your *tatecredue*. No 'wanting' is involved: all is inevitable flow."

"And if I do not function as you wish?"

The alien paused, as though briefly puzzled. "You live," it said finally. "Therefore, you exercise your function. Nonfunctioning, you could not exist. To exist and yet not exist—you would be a contradiction, *aubre*, a disruption in the flow. *Aubre* cannot be tolerated. To restore balanced flow, it would be necessary to deny the illusion that you exist."

That at least was clear enough, Ramon thought, feeling gooseflesh sweep across his skin.

Ramon chose his words carefully when he spoke again. "And what function am I to fulfill?"

The cold orange eyes fixed on him again. "Take care," the alien warned. "That we must interpret your *tatecredue* for you is a sign that you incline toward *aubre*. But we will grant you a dispensation, as you are not a proper creature. Listen: a man has escaped from us. Three days ago he fled from us on foot, and we have not been able to find him. By this act, he has shown himself to be *aubre*, and so proved that he does not exist. The illusion of his existence must therefore be negated. The man must not be allowed to reach a human settlement, to tell other humans about us. Should he do so, that would interfere with our own *tatecredue*. Such interference is *gaesu*, prime contradiction. Therefore you will find him, negate him, in order to restore balanced flow."

"How am I supposed to find him if you could not?"

"You are men. You are the same. You will find him."

"He could be anywhere by now!" Ramon protested.

"Where you would go and where he would go—they are the same. You will go where he has gone, and you will find him."

Ramon chewed his lip and thought. He had no intention of playing Judas Goat for these monsters, but he was naked, alone, and in their power. If he pretended to agree, they would have to take him out—out to the

world he knew. After that, he could slip away. It wouldn't do to give in too easily, though. Even things as strange as these might recognize that as subterfuge.

"If I do this thing for you, what do I get out of it?" he asked.

The alien stared at him for several long moments. "You are an improper and contradictory creature. *Aubre* may manifest in you. We will insure against such manifestations, by separating a part of ourselves to act as overseer. Maneck will sacrifice himself to maintain the flow."

The alien who had led him from the first chamber moved silently to Ramon's side. It was eerie—nothing so big should be so quiet.

"Maneck, eh?" Ramon said to the thing. "Your name's Maneck?"

Before Ramon could react, Maneck reached out and took him by the shoulders, lifted him like a doll, and held him immobile in the air. Ramon fought instinctively—nights at the bar and in the street coming back to his arms and legs in a rage. He might as well have punched the ocean. Maneck didn't budge.

Up from the pit rose a pale white snake.

Ramon watched in horrified fascination. It was obviously a cable of some sort—two bare wires protruded from the visible end—but its movements were so supple and lifelike that he could not help but think of it as a pale and sinister cobra. It reared almost to eye-level, swayed slowly from side to side, aimed its blind pallid head at Ramon. The head quivered slightly, as though the snake was testing the air in search of its prey. Then it stretched out toward him.

Again Ramon tried desperately to break free, but Maneck wrenched him effortlessly back into position. As the cable-snake came closer, he saw that it was pulsating rhythmically, as if it were truly alive, and that the two naked wires in its head were vibrating like a serpent's flickering tongue. His flesh crawled and he felt his testicles retract. He felt his nakedness vividly now—he was unprotected, helpless, all of the soft vulnerable parts of his body exposed to the hostile air. The cable touched the hollow of his throat.

Ramon felt a sensation like the touch of dead lips, a double pinprick of pain, a flash of intense cold. An odd quivering shock ran up and down his body, as though someone were tracing his nervous system with feather fingers. His vision dimmed for a heartbeat, then came back. Maneck lowered him to the ground.

The cable was now embedded in his neck. Fighting nausea, he reached up and took hold of it, feeling its pulse in his hands. It was warm to the touch, like human flesh. He pulled at it tentatively, then tugged harder. He felt the flesh of his throat move when he tugged. To rip it free would obviously be as difficult as tearing off his own nose. The cable pulsed again, and Ramon realized that it was pulsing in time to the beating of his heart. As he watched, it seemed to darken slowly, as if it were filling up with blood.

The cable had somehow also linked itself to the alien that had held him, blending into its right wrist. Maneck. He was on a leash. A hunting dog for demons.

"The *sahael* will not injure you, but it will help to resolve your contra-

dictions," the thing in the pit said as if sensing his distress but failing to understand it. "Should you manifest *aubre*, you will be corrected. Like this."

Ramon found himself on the floor, though he did not remember falling. Only now that the pain had passed could he look back at it, as a swimmer turns to look back at a wave that has passed over his head, and realize that it had been the worst pain he had ever experienced. He didn't remember screaming, but his throat was raw, and it almost seemed as if the echo of his shriek was still reverberating from the chamber walls; perhaps it would echo there forever. He caught his breath, and then retched. He knew that he would do whatever was required to prevent that from happening again, anything at all, and for the first time since he woke in darkness, Ramon Espejo felt ashamed.

"School yourself," the pale alien said. "Correct *aubre*, and even such a flawed thing as yourself may achieve cohesion or even coordinate level."

It took Ramon some time to realize that this gibberish had been a dismissal: a stern but kindly admonition, hellfire threatened, the prospect of redemption dangled, and go forth *mi hijo* and sin no more. The sonofabitch was a missionary! Maneck lifted Ramon back to his feet and nudged him toward a tunnel. The fleshy leash—the *sahael*—shrank to match whatever distance was between them. Maneck made a sound that he couldn't interpret and apparently gave up gentle coaxing. The alien moved briskly forward, the *sahael* tugging now at Ramon's throat. He had no choice but to follow, like a dog trotting at its master's heel.

FOUR

Back through the tunnels they went, through cavern after cavern, through rhythmic noise, billowing shadow, and glaring blue light. Ramon walked leadenly, like an automaton, pulled along by Maneck, the tether in his neck feeling heavy and awkward. The chill air leached the heat from his body, and even the work of walking wasn't enough to keep him warm.

In the privacy of his mind, Ramon searched for hope. Eleana would notice he was missing. Maybe. Given enough time. Or she might think he'd gone off again, down to Nuevo Janiero without her, to file his reports and collect his fees. Or run off on a drunken spree with some other woman. He weighed the probabilities; she might call for help and start a search, or she might wait, getting angrier and angrier until she worked herself into a blind rage over his absence. No. Eleana couldn't be trusted to search for him. Maybe Old Sanchez would start an inquiry when he didn't bring the van back. Or that bastard Javier in Diegotown might notice that no one was staying in his rooms. Rent would come due in two weeks . . .

There was no one. That was the truth. He had lived his life on his own terms—always on his own terms—and here was the price of it. He had no one to rescue him. He was on his own, hundreds of miles from the nearest

human settlement, captured and enslaved. So he would have to find his own way out. Escape. If only there was a way to avoid the pain that his slick, pulsing, fleshy leash could mete out.

Maneck tugged at the *sahael* and Ramon looked up, aware for the first time that they had stopped. The alien thing pushed a bundle into his arms. Clothes.

The clothes were a sleeveless one-piece garment, something like pajamas, a large cloak, and hard-soled slipper-boots, all made from a curious lusterless material. He pulled them on with fingers stiff from cold. The aliens were obviously not used to tailoring for humans; the clothes were clumsily-made and ill-fitting, but at least they afforded him some protection against the numbing cold. It wasn't until his nakedness was covered and warmth began to return to his limbs that his teeth began to chatter.

Maneck tugged him brusquely along into another high-ceilinged chamber. The place teemed with aliens, swarming over terraced layers of objects on the cavern floor. Equipment, perhaps, machines, computers, although most things here were so unfamiliar that they registered only as indecipherable blurs, weird amalgams of shape and shadow and winking light. Far across the cave, two giant aliens—similar to Maneck and the others, but fifteen or twenty feet tall—labored in gloom, lifting and stacking what looked like huge sections of honeycomb, moving with ponderous grace, as unreal and hallucinatorily beautiful as stop-motion dinosaurs in old horror movies. To one side, a smaller alien was herding a flow of spongy molasses down over a stairstep fall of boulders, touching the flowing mass occasionally with a long black rod, as if to urge it along.

On the other side of the room, up against the cavern wall, was a rank of the flying motorcycles. One had been fitted out with a sidecar. Ramon waited leadenly while Maneck examined the cycle, running its long slender fingers carefully over the controls. He could feel himself becoming dazed and passive, numbed by weariness and shock—he'd been through too much, too fast. And he was tired, more tired than he could remember being before; perhaps the shot they'd given him was wearing off. He was almost asleep on his feet when Maneck seized him, lifted him into the air as if he was a little child, and stuffed him into the sidecar. He struggled to sit up, but Maneck seized his arms, drew them behind his back, and bound them with a thin length of wire-like substance, then hobbled his legs, before turning and straddling the operator's saddle. Maneck touched a pushplate, and the cycle rose smoothly into the air.

Acceleration pushed Ramon's head against the rim of the sidecar, pinning it at an uncomfortable angle. In spite of the terror of his situation, he realized that he was not able to stay awake any longer. Even as they rose up toward the high-domed cavern roof, his eyes were squeezing shut, as though the mild g-forces that pulled with mossy inevitability on his bones were also drawing him inexorably into sleep.

Above them, the rock opened.

As Ramon's consciousness faded away, drowning him in hissing white snow, he saw, beyond the hole in the sky, a single pale and isolate star.

A freezing wind lashed him awake. He struggled to sit up. The sidecar

lurched, and he found himself looking straight down through an ocean of air at the tiny tops of the trees. The cycle canted over the other way, violently, and the darkening evening sky swirled around his head, momentarily turning the faint, newly-emerged stars into tight little squiggles of light.

They leveled off. Maneck sat astride the cycle's saddle unshakably, firm and cold as a statue, quills rippling in the bitter wind. Banking again, falling at a slant through the air. He couldn't have been insensible for more than a minute or two, Ramon realized; that was the alien's mountain just behind them, the exit-hole now irised shut again, and that was the mountain slope where he'd been captured just below. Even as they coasted down toward it, the sky was growing significantly darker around them. The sun had gone behind the horizon some moments before, leaving only the thinnest sliver of glazed red along the junction line of land and air. The rest of the sky was the color of plum and eggplant and ash, dying rapidly to ink-dark blackness overhead and to the west. Armed and bristling with trees, the mountain slope rushed up to meet them. Too fast! Surely they would crash . . .

They touched down lightly in the upland meadow where Ramon had made his camp, settling out of the sky as silently as the shadow of a feather. Maneck killed the cycle's engine. Blackness swallowed them, and they were surrounded by the sly and predatory noises of evening. In that darkness, Maneck seized Ramon, and, lifting him like a string-and-withe toy, dragged him from the cycle, carried him a few feet away, and dropped him to the ground.

Ramon groaned involuntarily, startled and ashamed by the loudness of his voice. His arms were still bound behind him, and to lie upon them was excruciatingly painful. He rolled over onto his stomach. The ground under him was so cold that it was comfortable, and even in his present sick and confused condition, Ramon realized that that was death. He thrashed and squirmed, and managed to roll himself up in the long cloak he'd been given; it was surprisingly warm. He would have fallen asleep then, in spite of his pain and discomfort, but light beat against his eyelids where there had been no light, and he opened his eyes.

The light seemed blinding at first, but it dimmed as his eyes adjusted. Maneck had brought something from the cycle, a small globe attached to a long metal rod, and jammed the sharp end of the rod into the soil; now the globe was alight, burning from within with a dim bluish light, sending off rhythmic waves of heat. As Ramon watched, Maneck walked around the globe—the *sahael* shortening visibly with each step—and came slowly toward him with seeming deliberation. Only then, watching Maneck prowl toward him, seeing the wet gleam in the corner of its orange eyes as it looked from side to side, seeing the way its nose crinkled and twitched, the way its head swiveled and swayed restlessly on the stubby neck, the shrugging of its shoulders at each step, hearing the iron rasp of its breath, smelling its thick musky odor—only then did some last part of Ramon's mind fully accept the fact that Maneck was an alien, accept it all the way down at the most basic of gut levels. It was not an odd animal, a man in costume, a robot, a dream, an illusion, a trick: it was an

intelligent alien being, and he was its captive, alone and at its mercy in the wilderness.

That simple knowledge hit Ramon with such force that he felt the blood begin to drain out of his face, and even as he was worming and scrambling backward in a futile attempt to get away from the monster, he was losing his grip on the world, losing consciousness, slipping down into darkness.

The alien stood over him, seen again through the hazy white snow of faintness, seeming to loom up endlessly into the sky like some horrid and impossible beanstalk, with eyes like blazing orange suns. That was the last thing Ramon saw. Then the snow piled up over his face and buried him, and everything was gone.

Morning was a blaze of pain. He had fallen asleep on his back, and he could no longer feel his arms. The rest of his body ached as though it had been beaten with clubs. The alien was standing over him again—or perhaps it had never moved, perhaps it had stood there all night, looming and remote, terrible, tireless, and unsleeping. The first thing Ramon saw that morning, through a bloodshot haze of pain, was the alien's face; the long twitching black snout with its blue and orange markings, the quills stirring in the wind and moving like the feelers of some huge insect.

I will kill you, Ramon thought. There was very little anger in it. Only a deep, animal certainty. *Somehow, I will kill you.*

Maneck hauled Ramon to his feet and set him loose, but his legs would not hold him, and he crashed back to the ground as soon as he was released. Again Maneck pulled him up, and again Ramon fell.

As Maneck reached for him the third time, Ramon screamed, "Kill me! Why don't you just kill me?" He wormed backward, away from Maneck's reaching hand. "You might as well just kill me now!"

Maneck stopped. Its head tilted to one side to regard Ramon curiously in an oddly birdlike manner. The cool orange eyes peered at him closely, unblinking.

"I need food," Ramon went on, in a more reasonable tone. "I need water. I need rest. I can't use my arms and legs if they're tied like this. I can't even stand, let alone walk!" He heard his voice rising again, but couldn't stop it. "Listen, you monster, I need to *piss*! I'm a man, not a machine!" With a supreme effort, he heaved himself to his knees and knelt there in the dirt, swaying. "Is this *aubre*? Eh? Good! Kill me, then! I can't go on like this!"

Man and alien stared at each other for a long, silent moment. Ramon, exhausted by his outburst, breathed in rattling gasps. Maneck studied him carefully, snout quivering. At last, it said, "You possess *retehue*?"

"How the shit would I know?" Ramon croaked, his voice rasping in his dry throat. "What the fuck is it?" He drew himself up as much as he could, and glared back at the alien.

"You possess *retehue*," the alien repeated, but it was not a question this time. It took a quick step forward, and Ramon flinched, afraid that the death he'd demanded was on its way. But instead, Maneck cut him free.

At first, he could feel nothing in his arms and legs; they were as dead as

old wood. Then sensation came back into them, burning like ice, and they began to spasm convulsively. Ramon set his face stoically and said nothing, but Maneck must have noticed and correctly interpreted the sudden pallor of his skin, for it reached down and began to massage Ramon's arms and legs. Ramon shrunk away from its touch—again he was reminded of snakeskin, dry, firm, warm—but the alien's powerful fingers were surprisingly deft and gentle, loosening knotted muscles, and Ramon found that he didn't mind the contact as much as he would have thought that he would; it was making the pain go away, after all, which was what really counted.

"Your limbs have insufficient joints," Maneck commented. "That position would not be uncomfortable for me." It bent its arms backward and forward at impossible angles to demonstrate. With his eyes closed, it was almost possible for Ramon to believe that he was listening to a human being—Maneck's Portuguese was much more fluent than that of the alien in the pit, and its voice had less of the rusty timbre of the machine. But then Ramon would open his eyes and see that terrible alien face, ugly and bestial, only inches from his own, and his stomach would turn over, and he would have to adjust all over again to the fact that he was chatting with a monster.

"Stand up now," Maneck said. It helped Ramon up, and supported him while he limped and stomped in a slow semi-circle to work out cramps and restore circulation, looking as if he was performing some arthritic tribal dance. At last, he was able to stand unsupported, although his legs wobbled and quivered with the strain.

"We have lost time this morning," Maneck said. "This is all time we might have employed in exercising our functions." You could almost imagine that it sighed. "I have not previously performed this type of function. I did not realize that you possessed *retehue*, and therefore failed to take all factors into account. Now we must suffer delays accordingly."

Suddenly, Ramon understood what *retehue* must be. He was more baffled than outraged. "How could you not realize that I was sentient? You were there all the while I talked to the white thing in the pit!"

"We were present, but I had not integrated yet," Maneck said simply. It did not elaborate further, and Ramon had to be content with that. "Now that I am, I will observe you closely. You are to demonstrate the limitations to the human flow. Once we are informed, the man's path is better predicted."

That's not hard to guess, Ramon thought, but did not say. *If there is some other poor bastard out here, knowing these monsters are after him, he's pushing like hell for Fiddler's Jump.*

"Speaking of flow," Ramon said. "I still have to piss."

"Elimination of waste will suffice as a starting point. I will observe."

"I don't think so," Ramon said. "You can stay here."

To his surprise, the alien did as it was told. Ramon walked unsteadily to the edge of the meadow, the leash in his neck hardly tugging him as he walked. He pissed into the scrub brush and tried to make sense of the alien's behavior. The limitations of human flow, it had said. For a being so fascinated by purpose, Maneck was strangely interested in Ramon's need

to urinate, which ought to have struck it as irrelevant. It wasn't an activity that seemed important to hunting down the fugitive. It had not known that binding his arms behind him would discomfort him. Ramon stood for a long moment after his bladder was empty, considering. Perhaps the aliens needed him to understand what the habits of a man were. He was more than a hound. Merely by *being human*, he was a guide for them.

Ramon pulled his clothes back into place, disturbed for a moment by how rough the fabric felt against his skin. Maneck loomed by the cycle, still as a tree. Ramon shrugged and returned.

"You are complete?" Maneck asked.

"Sure," Ramon said. "Complete enough for the moment."

"You have other needs?"

"I should eat. Do you have any food?"

Maneck paused for a long moment, as if struggling to understand the question. Then its snout twitched.

"No," it said. "The *oekh* I have would not nourish you. How do you obtain food? I will allow you to procure it for yourself."

Every minute that Ramon stalled was a gift to the fugitive, whoever he was, wherever he was. If he could stall long enough for the man to escape, that might bring help. If the prey could escape the net, someone would come. The news would spread. Eleana and Sanchez would guess what had happened to him. It was his best hope. Feeding off the land wasn't hard. The amino acids that had built up the biosphere of São Paulo were almost all identical to those on earth. A half-hour of gathering would have gotten him enough mianberry to make a small meal. Sug beetles would boil up in three minutes and tasted like lobster. This far north, you could pick them off the trees by the handful. But none of that would take long enough.

"We'll have to improvise some traps," Ramon said. "It could take a while."

"We will begin," Maneck said.

Ramon scouted the wreckage that had been his van and tent, gathering the lengths of wire, cloth, and rope he needed to set up snares. The animals this far north were naïve, unfamiliar with traps, never having been hunted by humans before, and so were easy to catch. He tied the ropes and bent the wire, surprised by how much the metal bit into the flesh of his hands. The syrup bath in which the aliens had soaked him must have melted away the calluses from his hands and feet, leaving his fingers ill-prepared for real work. Still, he placed the snares, Maneck watching him with what seemed sometimes like profound curiosity, sometimes like impatience, but was likely an emotion Ramon had never felt or heard named.

They waited as the sun rose higher in the perfect blue sky. Maneck ate some of his *oekh*, which turned out to be a brown paste the consistency of molasses with a thick vinegary scent. Ramon scratched at the place in his neck where the *sahael* anchored in his flesh, and tried to ignore the emptiness of his belly. The hunger grew quickly, though, and, in spite of his good intentions about stalling as long as he could, it was less than two hours later when he rose and walked out to check his catch—two grasshoppers,

and a gordita, the fuzzy round marsupials that the *paulistas* called "the little fat ones of the Virgin." The gordita had died badly, biting itself in its frenzy. Its spiky fur was already black with thick, tarry blood. Maneck looked on with interest as Ramon removed the animals from the snares.

"It is difficult to think of this as having anything to do with food," it said. "Why do the creatures strangle themselves for you? Is it their *tatecredue*?"

"No," Ramon said as he strung the bodies on the length of carrying twine. "It's not their *tatecredue*. It's just something that happened to them." He found himself staring at his hands as he worked, and, for some reason, his hands made him uneasy. He shrugged the feeling away. "Don't your people hunt for food?"

"The hunt is not for food," Maneck said flatly. "Food is *ae euth'eloi*—a made thing. The hunt is wasted on creatures such as these. How can they appreciate it? Their brains are much too small."

"My stomach is also too small, but it will appreciate *them*." He stood up, swinging the dead animals over his shoulder.

"Do you swallow the creatures now?" Maneck asked.

"First they must be cooked."

"Cooked?"

"Burned, over a fire."

"Fire," Maneck repeated. "Uncontrolled combustion. Proper food does not require such preparation. You are a primitive creature. These steps waste time, time which might be better used to fulfill your *tatecredue*. *Ae euth'eloi* does not interfere with the flow."

Ramon shrugged. "I cannot eat your food, monster, and I cannot eat these raw." He held the carcasses up for inspection. "If we are to get on with me exercising my function, I need to make a fire. Help me gather sticks."

Back at the clearing, Ramon started a small cookfire. When the flames were crackling well, the alien turned to look at Ramon. "Combustion is proceeding," it said. "What will you do now? I wish to observe this function *cooking*."

Was that an edge of distaste in the alien's voice? He suddenly had a flash of how odd the process must seem to Maneck: catching and killing an animal, cutting its pelt off and pulling out its internal organs, dismembering it, toasting the dead carcass over a fire, and then eating it. For a moment, it seemed a grotesque and ghoulish thing to do, and it had never seemed like that before. He stared down at the gordita in his hand, and then at his hand itself, sticky with dark blood, and the subtle feeling of wrongness he'd been fighting off all morning intensified once again. "First I must skin them," he said resolutely, pushing down the uneasiness, "before I can cook them."

"They have skin already, do they not?" Maneck said.

Ramon surprised himself by smiling. "I must take their skin off. And their fur. Cut it off, with a knife, you see? Way out here, I'll just throw the pelts away, eh? Waste of money, but then grasshopper pelts aren't worth much anyway."

Maneck's snout twitched, and it prodded at the grasshoppers with a

foot. "This seems inefficient. Does it not waste a large portion of the food, cutting it off and throwing it away? All of the rind."

"I don't eat fur."

"Ah," Maneck said. It moved up close behind Ramon and sank to the ground, its legs bending backwards grotesquely. "It will be interesting to observe this function. Proceed."

"I need a knife," Ramon said.

Wordlessly, the alien plucked a cylinder from its belt and handed it to Ramon. When Ramon turned it over in bafflement, Maneck reached across and did something to the cylinder, and a six-inch silver wire sprang out stiffly. Ramon took the strange knife and began gutting the gordita. The wire slid easily through the flesh. Perhaps it was the hunger that focused Ramon so intently on his task, because it wasn't until he had set the gordita on a spit over the fire and begun on the first grasshopper that he realized what the alien had done. *It had handed him a weapon.*

He fought the sudden rush of adrenaline, struggling to keep the blade from wobbling in his hands, to keep his hands from shaking. Bent over the careful task of digging out the grasshopper's rear gills, he glanced at Maneck. The alien seemed to have noticed nothing. The problem was, where to strike it? Stabbing it in the body was too great a risk; he didn't know where the vital organs were, and he couldn't be sure of striking a killing blow. Maneck was larger and stronger than he was. In a protracted fight, Ramon knew, he would lose. It had to be done swiftly. The throat, he decided, with a rush of exhilaration that was almost like flying. He would slash the knife as deep across the alien's throat as he could. The thing had a mouth and it breathed, after all, so there had to be an air passage in the neck somewhere. If he could sever that, it would only be a matter of remaining alive long enough for the alien to choke to death on its own blood. It was a thin chance, but he would take it.

"Look here," he said, picking up the body of the grasshopper. With its legs and scales cut away, its flesh was soft and pink as raw tuna. Maneck leaned closer, as Ramon had hoped, its eyes trained on the dead flesh in his left hand, ignoring the blade in his right. The heady elation of violence filled him, as if he was in the street outside a bar in Diegotown. The monsters didn't know that this thing they'd captured knew how to be a monster too! He waited until Maneck turned its head a little to the side to better squint at the grasshopper, exposing the mottled black-and-yellow flesh of its throat, and then he struck—

Abruptly, he was lying on his back on the ground, staring up into the tall violet sky. His stomach muscles were knotted, and he was breathing in harsh little gasps. The pain had hit him like a stone giant's fist, crumpled him and thrown him aside. It had been over in an eyeblink, too quick to be remembered, but his body still ached and twitched with the shock. He had dropped the knife.

You fool, he thought.

Maneck moved into his field of vision and stood looking down at him. "That was unwise of you," it said, placidly. "It is not possible to take me by surprise. It cannot be done. Do you understand this?"

"You can . . . you can read my mind?"

"The *sahael* drinks from the flow of your body. I am tied to your neural pathways as an overseer. The intention to act precedes the action, and begins cascading flows. All flows relate and interact, and so you cannot act before I am aware of the action you are taking. You are a primitive being not to know this."

Maneck lifted him easily and set him on his feet. To Ramon's shame and humiliation, the alien gently placed the wire knife back in his hand.

"Continue the function," Maneck said. "You were flaying the corpse of the small animal."

Ramon turned the silver cylinder slowly, shaking his head. He was unmanned. He could no more defeat this thing than an infant child could best his father. He was not even a threat to it.

"You are . . . distressed," Maneck said. "Why?"

"Because you are still alive!" Ramon spat.

The alien seemed to consider this.

"You attempted to function, and failed in your task. The distress you feel is an awareness of *aubre*, and shows promise for you, but you have not understood your *tatecredue*. These outbursts are *part* of your proper functioning. The uncontrolled violence, the tiny bladder and inefficient means of expelling nitrogenous waste, the aversion to eating the rind of another creature . . . all these things inform our behavior and lead us to the better fulfillment of our purpose. If you do not embody the weaknesses of the man as well as the strengths, we cannot prevent him from reaching others of his kind."

"My strengths are meaningless," Ramon said bitterly. "Another man might not have tried to kill you. Or he might have found some better way to do it. You have nothing to learn from me."

"He would have done as you have," Maneck said. "He could not do otherwise, any more than a single flow can move against itself. Turbulence can only come of *aubre* or else from without."

Something shifted in the back of Ramon's mind. The roughness of the alien cloth against his skin, the calluses gone from his fingertips. He had not been breathing in that tank. His heart had not been beating. He dropped the knife, the wire scooping up a tiny spray of dirt where it landed. Slowly, he pulled back his sleeve. The scar he'd gotten in the machete fight with Chulo Lopez at the bar outside Little Dog, the trails of puckered white flesh that Eleana's fingertips opened and re-opened when they tore at each other during half-crazed sex, were gone. There were no cigarette stains on his fingers. None of the small nicks and discolorations and calluses that were the legacy of a lifetime working with your hands. Over the years, his arms had been burnt almost black by the sun, but now his skin was smooth and unblemished and pale brown as an eggshell. An awareness half-buried rose up in him, and he went cold.

"What have you done?" he said.

The alien stood still, observing him.

"What have you *done*?" Ramon screamed.

"I have performed many functions," Maneck said slowly, like a teacher speaking to a very dim child. "Which of these distresses you?"

"My body! My skin! What did you *do* to me?"

"Ah! Interesting. You are capable of *khetanae*. This may not be good. I doubt the man is able to integrate, and even if he did, it would not cause this disorientation. You may be diverging from him."

"What are you talking about, monster!"

"Your distress," Maneck said, simply. "You are becoming aware of who you are."

"I am Ramon Espejo!"

"No," Maneck said. "You are not that person."

FIVE

Ramon—if he *was* Ramon—sank slowly to the ground. Maneck, looming beside him, explained in its strange passionless voice. The human Ramon Espejo had discovered the refuge three days before. That alone had been contradiction, and in order to correct the illusion that he existed, he had been attacked. He escaped, but not uninjured. An appendage—a finger—had been torn from him in the attack. That flesh had acted as the seed for the creation of a made thing—*ae euth'eloi*—that had participated in the original being's flow. Maneck had to explain twice before Ramon truly understood that it meant him.

"As you express that flow, you collapse into the forms from which you came. There was some loss of fidelity, so those forms that were of controlling function were emphasized—the brain and nerve column—while the skin complications were sacrificed. You will continue to develop across time."

"I am Ramon Espejo," Ramon said. "And you are a filthy whore with breath like a Russian's asshole."

"Both of these things are incorrect," Maneck said patiently.

"You're lying!"

"The language you use is not a proper thing. The function of communication is to transmit knowledge. To lie would fail to transmit knowledge. That is not possible."

Ramon's face went hot, then cold. "You're lying," he whispered.

"Your flesh is seared," Maneck said, and it was a long moment before Ramon understood. The gordita hadn't been turning on its spit. The meat was starting to burn. He sat up and shifted it, exposing the raw pink flesh that had been on the top to the heat of the flame. It was something concrete, physical, immediate. The scent of roasting meat woke a hunger in him that was more powerful even than horror or despair.

The body keeps on living, he thought bitterly, even when we do not wish it to.

"I know about cloning," Ramon said when he had composed himself. "What you say you've done isn't possible. A clone wouldn't have my memories. It would have my genes, yes, but it would be just a little baby. It wouldn't know anything about the life I've lived."

"You know nothing of what we can and cannot do," Maneck chided, "and

yet you assert otherwise. This was not reproduction. You are a product of recapitulation." Maneck paused. "The thought fits poorly in your language, but if you were to gain enough *atakka* to understand it fully, you would diverge further from the model. It interferes with our *tatecredue*. Show me how the man would consume this seared flesh."

Because it was already what he had intended, Ramon did as he was bidden and ate, carving strips off the gordita with the wire knife. He felt Maneck's eyes upon him as he stuffed food greedily into his mouth, relishing the peppery taste of the meat, the grease he licked from his fingers. And as he chewed, he thought. If it was true—if he were not who he knew himself to be—then that other Ramon would not bring help. Even if he reached Fiddler's Jump, he had no way to know that his twin existed. And he might not care if he did. The other Ramon would likely think of him as a monster. An abomination.

He *was* an abomination. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead, his armpits, the back of his knees. He was coming to believe what Maneck had said: he was not the real Ramon Espejo, he was some monster born in a vat, an unnatural thing only three days old. Everything he remembered was false, had happened to some other man, not to him. *He'd* never been out of the mountain before, never broken heads in a bar fight, never made love to a woman. This meat he was eating now was the first meal he'd ever had in his life.

The thought was vertiginous, almost unthinkable, and deliberately, with an effort, he put it aside. To think deeply about it would lead to madness. Instead, he concentrated on carving a slender leg from the gordita and using his teeth to strip the greasy meat from the bone. *If this is the first meal of my life, at least it's a good one.* Whoever or whatever he was, he was alive, out in the world, reacting to it with animal intensity. The food tasted as good as his false memories said that it should, or perhaps better; the wind felt as cool and refreshing as it swept across the meadow; the immense vista of the Sierra Hueso, sun flashing off the snowcaps on the highest peaks, was as beautiful as it ever was. None of that had changed, regardless of his origin. He *was* Ramon Espejo, no matter what the monster said, no matter what his hands looked like. He had to be, because there was no one else to *be*. What difference did it make if there was another man out there who also thought that he was him? Or a hundred such? He was alive, right here and now, in this instant, whether he was three days old or thirty, and that was what mattered. He was alive—and he intended to stay that way.

And what Maneck had revealed changed everything. There was no advantage to stalling anymore. Maybe if he could actually *find* that other Ramon, together they could somehow turn the tables on the alien. But how to proceed wasn't immediately clear. Certainly the other would head for Fiddler's Jump. Nothing else was even close. And likely he would go by the Rio Embudo. The big river came out of the mountains a hundred and twenty-three kilometers from his ruined camp, and eventually passed through Fiddler's Jump itself. It was where *he* would have gone had he been frightened, wounded, and alone. First, he would have gone south, through the foothills, to bypass the rapids and the falls, and then he would

have turned west, to find the river. He would have built a raft, and headed down the Rio Embudo, traveling much faster than he possibly could on foot through the thick, tangled forest. And he was sure that the other would do the same. The aliens had been smart to use him as their hunting dog after all—he *did* know what the other would do, where he would go. He *could* find him . . .

But he also knew what he himself would have done if he knew he were being hunted. *He* would have found a way to kill his hunters. And that now was Ramon's only chance. If he could alert the other that he was being pursued and trust him to take the right action, together they might destroy the alien thing that held his leash. For a moment, he hoped deeply that what Maneck had said was the truth, that there was another mind like his own out free in the wilderness. He felt an odd surge of pride in that other Ramon—in spite of these monsters and all the powers at their command, he had gotten away from them, fooled them, showed them what a *man* could do.

The last grasshopper consumed, Ramon drowned the fire and covered it over with dirt while Maneck watched. It was approaching midday. Three days, Maneck said, the other had been running. Three and a half now. He guessed that he could cover thirty kilometers in a day, especially with all the demons of Hell on his heels. That put his twin almost to the river by day's end. Unless his wounds had slowed him. Unless he had become septic and died alone in the forest, far from help. Ramon shuddered at the thought, but then dispelled it, grinning. That was *Ramon Espejo* out there. A tough-ass bastard like that wasn't going to die easy!

Maneck listened as he poured out his theory, or most of it. Satisfied, the alien straddled the cycle and gestured to the sidecar with a careful, studied motion. Ramon obeyed. The seat had not been fashioned for a human anatomy, but Maneck didn't bind him this time, and it was not too uncomfortable. They lifted, tilted, and angled into the sky, away from the upland plain in the shadow of the alien mountain. Ramon craned his head around for one last look. Soon the scorched mark where his van and tent had been was little more than a black thumbprint on the landscape. How he wished he had never come here, never set that fateful charge! And then he remembered that he had *not* done any of those things. It had been *the other* who had done them. All of the past belonged to the other. He had nothing but the present, nothing but Maneck and the cycle, the cold wind in his face, the clouds scuttling through an ominous indigo sky.

The cycle flew south and west. Behind them to the north were the tall peaks of the Sierra Hueso, their upper slopes now obscured by wet, churning gray cloud—it was snowing back there, behind, above. South, the world widened and flattened into forested lowland, then tilted down toward the southern horizon, steaming and slopping like a soup plate, puddled with marshes on the edge of sight. As they passed over the barren black jumble of the foothills, Ramon heard a thin chittering squeak from below them. He peered over the rim of the sidecar. A flapjack, trilling in alarm, was diving away from them. He wondered if it might be the same one he'd seen days ago, and smiled to encounter an old

friend again. And then remembered, with a chill, that *he* hadn't been the one who'd seen it. It was a stranger after all. As was all the rest of the world.

After a long, cold, silent time, Maneck staring wordlessly ahead as they flew, Ramon lost in his troubled thoughts, he realized that they must be nearing the river. Below them was a thick forest of iceroot, tall gaunt trees with translucent blue-white needles like a million tiny icicles. And then it came into sight, from up here only a thin silver ribbon in the world of green and blue and orange trees and black stone—the Rio Embudo, the main channel of the great river system that drained the Sierra Hueso and all the north lands. Hundreds of kilometers to the southwest, Fiddler's Jump sat high on its rocky, red-veined bluffs above the same river, its ramshackle wooden hotels and houses full of miners and trappers and lumberjacks, its docks crowded with ore barges and vast log floats soon to be launched downstream to Swan's Neck. It was there, to the safety and lights and raucous humanity of Fiddler's Jump, that the other was almost surely headed.

Which meant that he might be somewhere below them now.

Ramon shifted his weight and leaned nearer the alien, shouting to him over the rush of the wind.

"Move down! We can't see him from so high up! Go lower!"

"But proximity would create a greater opportunity to alert the man to our presence. He must be near."

That was exactly what Ramon had been thinking, but now he scowled and made an impatient gesture toward the wide landscape below them.

"We can be seen from anywhere if we're all the way up here," Ramon said, and then embellished with a small lie. "Human beings are very attuned to the skies. We look up all the time. Get low, and we won't be visible from so many places. Besides, I sure as shit can't see him through the trees. Can you?"

Maneck seemed to consider this, and, in answer, the cycle slowed and dropped until they were skimming lightly over the top branches of the trees like a fly over the surface of a pond. And somewhere beneath those shifting leaves was the other. His twin. His best hope of freedom.

See us, Ramon thought, as if by pushing with his mind he might reach through space and leaf-green obscurity. *See us, you stupid pendejo!* See us!

The river was wide—what had been a thin ribbon seen from afar had stretched into a clear expanse of glacier-cold water. Trees pressed up to the banks, exposed roots trailing into the flow like thick fingers. Maneck swept along the river, traveling south until they found a clearing at the water's edge where an old sandbar had been abandoned by a shift in the river. There they set down. To judge from the angle of the sun, it was nearing the middle afternoon. Another two or three hours still before nightfall. Maneck, ignoring him, pulled a series of spheres and rods from the compartments of the cycle. Tools, but for what purpose Ramon couldn't guess.

"What are you doing?" Ramon asked.

"Preparing. The man is within the forest. We will find him there."

Images passed through Ramon's mind—the spheres shifting through the air, sniffing out the other man, the other him. He kept the dread from his voice when he spoke.

"That's stupid. The forest is huge. We know he will pass by on the river. We're far more south than he could possibly have gotten on foot in this time, so he's still above us somewhere. If you go poking through the trees, he can slip by. Wait here, and let him come to us. Instead of looking through the whole *terreno*, you only need to look from here—" Ramon pointed across the wide swath of slow water to the distant bank "—to there."

And we will be in one place, where *he* can find *us*, Ramon thought, but did not say. Maneck shifted, his sinuous arms shifting for a moment like a sea creature in an unseen current.

"If the man has come further south than you think he could, he may have already passed us," Maneck said.

"So fly down the river at night. You can go faster than he can. He'll only have a raft."

Again, the seemingly boneless arms shifted, and then fell.

"This is not the way proper flow dictates, but if it is as the man would behave, we will do as you suggest."

"Good," Ramon said. "In the meantime, I'll show you how to fish. The man, he'll need to eat. You may as well see how."

"He will not set snares? As you did earlier?"

"He will," Ramon said. "But he'll set them in the water. Here. I'll show you."

Once the alien understood what Ramon needed, it cooperated. They rigged a crude fishing pole from a thin, dry limb snapped off a nearby ice-root pine and a length of pale, soft, infinitely malleable alien wire. A different sort of wire was shaped into a hook, and Ramon stamped along the shore turning over rocks until he found a fat orange gret beetle to use for bait. Maneck's snout twitched with sudden interest as Ramon impaled the insect.

Ramon led the alien to a likely-looking spot and dropped the line. The Rio Embudo was cold to be near, and the alien clothing wasn't as thick as his own had been, but Ramon didn't complain. His thoughts were on cooking the catch, once he had it. With a bit of green wood, he could build a fire that smoked badly. Something to act as a guide for the other . . .

The first bite brought up something Ramon had never seen. That wasn't odd—there were new creatures caught in the nets at Diegotown and Swan's Neck every week, so little yet was known about São Paulo. This was a bloated, gray bottom dweller whose scales were dotted by white, vaguely pustulent nodules. It hissed at him as he pulled the hook free, and, with a sense of disgust, he threw it back into the water. It vanished with a plop.

"Why did you throw the food away?" Maneck asked.

"It was monstrous," Ramon said. "Like you."

He found another beetle, and they resumed their watch on the river as night slowly gathered around them. The sky above the canopy shifted toward the startling violet of the São Paulo sunset. Auroras danced green and blue and gold. Watching them, Ramon felt for an instant the pro-

found peace that the open wilderness always gave him. Even captive and enslaved, even with his flesh pierced by the *sahael*, even though he was an abomination himself, the immense, dancing sky was beautiful and a thing of comfort.

Maneck chirruped and shifted, uneasily, staring up as if searching for something in the darkening sky. Ramon glanced at it. Its eyes had shifted again to the hot orange he had first seen, and its crest had risen and bristled like an animal sensing threat.

"What?" Ramon demanded.

"You have seen something. The *sahael* detects a change in your flow. And yet I find nothing to trigger this effect. You will tell me what you have seen!"

"The sky," Ramon said.

"Ah! Yes. And the man is very attuned to the sky. I recall this."

The alien shifted back to its motionless waiting, as if satisfied. Another hour or so later, Ramon finally caught a fat, white bladfisch with vivid scarlet fins. It was too dark by then for fire smoke to be of use, so Ramon simply built a large cookfire and roasted the fish gently. The flesh was warm and succulent, and when he had eaten his fill, he leaned back against the cycle and yawned. He felt very full and oddly contented despite his perilous situation and inhuman companion.

"Now, if we only had something to drink, eh?" he said expansively. "And a smoke. Ah! I would enjoy a good smoke." He thought wistfully of the cigarette he'd used to light the fuse all that time ago. Or that the other had used. The cigarette he had smoked with other lungs, in another lifetime.

The alien sat a few feet away, taking its own nourishment. The *sahael* stretched between them.

"There is river water to drink," Maneck pointed out. "Your biology requires that you drink. But what is a 'smoke'?"

Ramon tried to describe a cigarette to the creature. Maneck's snout began to twitch in revulsion before he had half-finished.

"I do not comprehend the function of *smoking*," Maneck said. "The function of the lungs is to oxygenate the body. Does not filling the lungs with the fumes of burning plants and the waste products of their incomplete combustion interfere with this function? What is the purpose of smoking?"

"Smoking gives us cancer," he said, and tossed a stone side-arm into the Rio Embudo. The alien seemed so solemn, and puzzled, that he could not resist the impulse to have a little fun with it.

"Ah! And what is *cancer*?"

Ramon explained.

"That is *aubre*!" Maneck said, its voice harsh and grating in its alarm. "Your function is to find the man, and you will not be permitted to interfere with this purpose. Do not attempt to thwart me by contracting cancer!"

Ramon chuckled, then laughed. One wave of hilarity seemed to overwhelm the next, and soon he was holding his side and coughing with the strength of the laughter shaking him. Maneck moved nearer, its crest rising and falling in a way that made Ramon think it was questioning—

like a child who has to ask her parents what she has said to amuse them.

"You are having a seizure," Maneck said. "And yet the *sahael* suggests it is pleasurable . . ."

It was too much. Ramon howled and kicked his feet, pointing at the alien in derision. He couldn't speak. The absurdity of his situation and the powerful strain his mind had been under amplified the humor of Maneck's confusion until he was helpless before it. The alien moved forward and then back, agitated and uncertain. Slowly, the fit faded, and Ramon found himself spent, lying on the ground, the stars of São Paulo impassive above him.

"You are unwell?" Maneck asked.

"I'm fine, monster," Ramon said. "I'm fine. You, though, are very funny."

"I do not understand."

"No. No, you don't! That's what makes you funny."

Maneck stared solemnly at him. "You are fortunate that I am not in cohesion," it said. "If I were, we would destroy you at once and start again with another duplicate, as such fits indicate that you are a defective organism. Why did you undergo this seizure? Is it a symptom of cancer?"

"Stupid monster," Ramon said. "I was laughing."

"Explain *laughing*. I do not comprehend this function."

He groped for an explanation the monster would understand. "Laughter is a good thing," he said, weakly. "Pleasurable. A man who cannot laugh is nothing. It is part of our function."

"This is not so," Maneck replied. "Laughing halts the flow. It interferes with proper function."

"Laughing makes me feel good," Ramon said. "When I feel good, I function better. It's like food, you see."

"That is an incorrect statement. Food provides energy for your body. Laughing does not."

"A different kind of energy. When something is funny, I laugh."

"Explain *funny*."

He thought for a minute, then recalled a joke he had heard the last time he was in Little Dog. Eloy Chavez had told it to him when they went drinking together. "Listen, then, monster," he said, "and I will tell you a funny story."

The telling did not go very well. Maneck kept interrupting with questions, asking for definitions and explanations, until Ramon finally said irritably, "Son of a whore, the story will not be funny if you do not shut up and let me tell it to you. You are ruining it with all these questions!"

"Why does this make the incident less funny?" Maneck asked.

"Never mind!" Ramon snapped. "Just listen."

The alien said nothing more, and this time he told it straight through without interruption, but when he was finished, Maneck twitched its snout and stared at him from expressionless orange eyes.

"Now you are supposed to laugh," Ramon told it. "That was a very funny story."

"Why is this incident *funny*?" it said. "The man you spoke of was instructed to mate with a female of its species and kill a large carnivore. If

this was his *tatecredue*, he did not fulfill it. Why did he mate with the carnivore instead? Was he *aubre*? The creature injured him, and might have killed him. Did he not understand that this might be the result of his actions? He behaved in a contradictory manner."

"That's *why* the story is funny! Don't you understand? He raped the bear."

"Yes, I comprehend that," said Maneck. "Would the story not be more 'funny' if the man had performed his function properly?"

"No, no, *no*! It would not be funny at *all* then!" He glanced sidelong at the alien, sitting there like a great solemn lump, its face grave, and couldn't help but start to laugh again.

And then the pain came—world-rending, humiliating, abasing. It lasted longer than he had remembered; hellish and total and complex as nausea. When at last it ended, Ramon found himself curled tight in a ball, his fingers scrabbling at the *sahael* which pulsed with his own heartbeat. To his shame, he was weeping, betrayed as a dog kicked without cause. Maneck stood over him, silent and implacable, and, in that moment, to Ramon, a figure of perfect evil.

"Why?" Ramon shouted, ashamed to hear the break in his voice. "Why? I did nothing to you!"

"You threaten to contract cancer to avoid our purpose. You engage in a seizure that impairs your functioning. You take pleasure in contradictions. You take pleasure in the failure to integrate. This is *aubre*. Any sign of *aubre* will be punished thus."

"I laughed," Ramon said. "I only laughed!"

"Any laughter will be punished thus."

In the darkness, Ramon felt something like vertigo. He had forgotten. He had forgotten again that this thing on the far end of his tether was not a strangely shaped man. The mind behind the opaque orange eyes was not a human mind. It had been easy to forget. And it had been dangerous.

If he was to live—if he was to escape this and return to the company of human beings—he had to remember that this thing was not like him. He was a man, however he had been created. And Maneck was a monster. He had been a fool to treat him otherwise.

"I will not laugh again," Ramon said.

Maneck said nothing more, but sat down to watch the river. Silence stretched between them, a gulf as strange and dark as the void between stars. Many times Ramon had felt estranged from the people he was forced to deal with—*norteamericanos*, Brazilians, or even the full-blooded *mejicanos* to whom he was related by courtesy of rape; they thought differently, those strangers, felt things differently, could not wholly be trusted because they could not wholly be understood. Often women, even Eleana, made him feel that way too. Perhaps that was why he had spent so much of his life by himself, why he was more at home alone in the wilderness than he had ever been with his others of his kind. But all of them had more to do with him than Maneck ever could. He was separated from a *norteamericano* by history, culture, and language—but even a gringo knew how to laugh. No such common ground united Ramon and Maneck; between them lay light-years, and a million centuries of evolu-

tion. He could take nothing for granted about the thing at the other end of the *sahael*. The thought made him colder than the breeze from the river.

"I need to sleep," Ramon said at last.

"That is well," Maneck replied. "I will watch the river."

Ramon spread his cloak on the ground, and rolled himself in it as well as he could with the *sahael* in the way. Before long, he found himself beginning to drift. In his torpor, he realized that the *alien* had been the one learning all this time—how a man ate, how he pissed, how he slept. *Ramon* had learned nothing. For all his strategy and subterfuge, he knew hardly more about the monster than when he'd first woken in darkness.

He would learn. If he had been created as the thing said, then in a way Ramon was part alien himself—the product of an alien technology. He was a new man. He could learn new ways. He would come to understand the aliens, what they believed, how they thought. He would leave no tool unused.

Sleep stole into him, taking him gently down below consciousness, his determination to *know* still locked in his mind like a rat in a pit terrier's teeth. Ramon Espejo felt the dreams lapping at his mind like water at the bank of a river, and at last let them come. They were strange, dreams such as Ramon Espejo had never dreamed before.

But after all, he was not Ramon Espejo.

SIX

In his dream, he was within the river. He had no need to breathe, and moving through the water was as simple as thinking. Weightless, he inhabited the currents like a fish, like the water itself. His consciousness shifted throughout the river as if it were his body. He could feel the stones of the riverbed where the water smoothed them and the shift, far ahead, where the banks turned the flow one way and then another. And farther, past that to the sea.

The sea. Vast as a night sky, but *full*. The flow shifting throughout, alive and aware. Ramon floated down through the waters until he came near the dappled bottom and it swam away, the back of a leviathan larger than a city and still insignificant in the living abyss.

And then he was also the abyss.

Ramon dreamed of flow. Meaningless syllables took on significance and passed back into nonsense. Insights profound as love and sleep moved through him, and left him filled with a terrible awe. The sky was an ocean, and the flow filled the space between stars. He followed the flow for hundreds or thousands of years, swimming between the stars, his belly heavy with generations yet unborn, searching for refuge, for someplace *safe*, away from pursuit, where he could hide and fulfill his destiny. His mind was a river, and he fed into the sea and sky. The part of his dream that was human knew that if he had the courage, he would see the face of God in the waters.

And then, still dreaming, something caught him. An eddy powerful as violence threw him in a direction he could not name, and there in the current floated the bodies of the dead—alien forms but familiar as lovers. The great pale beast in the pit who had counseled him before this desperate hunt began. The small, bluish forms of *kait* eggs, now never to hatch. Yellow-fringed *mahadya* and half-grown *ataruae* still bent at the spine. (These were not words that Ramon knew, and yet he knew them.) All of them beyond redemption. He was Maneck, *athanai* of his cohort, and these dead that touched him, that polluted the flow, were his failing. His *tatecredue* was unfulfilled, and each of these beautiful things had fallen into illusion because he had failed to bear the weight of truth.

With a sorrow as profound as any Ramon had ever felt—more than the loss of his mother and his Yaqui father, more than the heartbreak of first love—he began to eat the dead, and with every corpse that he took into himself, he became less real, more lost in *aubre* and sin, more fully damned, until he reached out for the last floating, lost, illusory form and woke with a shriek.

Maneck stood beside him, its long arms lifting him with something between tenderness and anger. In the east, a paleness had snuffed out stars—the dawn coming up.

"What have you done?" the alien cried, and, as it did, seemed somehow less alien, lost and frightened and alone.

"*Gaesu*," Ramon said. "Prime contradiction. This is what it means? That all of you kill yourselves?"

"You should not have been able to use the *sahael* this way," Maneck said. "You should not have been able to drink of *my* flow. You are diverging from the man. It threatens our function. You will not do this again, or I will punish you!"

"Why?" Ramon asked, and the alien knew as well as he did that he was not asking why he would be punished. Maneck blinked its strange orange eyes and seemed to settle back, subtly defeated.

"To be observed *cannot happen*," Maneck said. "The illusion that it *has* happened is prime contradiction, the negation of reality. We escaped from our enemies and came here, we have hidden here for generations of recycling, waiting until the time was right to fulfill the *tatecredue* of our kind. If we were to be seen, we would not be what we are, we would *never have been* what we are. That which cannot be found cannot *be* found. This is contradiction. It must be resolved."

"You would all die rather than be discovered?"

"It must be resolved," the alien repeated.

"That doesn't make sense. The one, the man"—he couldn't bring himself to call him Ramon—"he's *already* seen you."

"He is still within illusion. If he is prevented from reaching his kind, the information cannot diffuse. He will have been corrected. The illusion of his existence will have been denied. If *he* is real, however, *we* cannot be."

"*Dios mio*," Ramon said. "You are . . . sick. You are sick, sick creatures."

"It is not illness. It is the dictate of proper flow. Your mind is twisted

and alien," Maneck said. "And that is as it *should* be. You will cease to diverge from the man. We will wait here and hunt him. If he does not reach his hive, there will be no *gaesu*."

The alien turned its back to him, its attention once again on the river. Ramon lay back, listening to the rush and murmur of the river, staring at the sky as dawn slowly turned the black to blue, the light cool and bright as the foreign sun rose. In the distance, there came the odd booming cry of a *descamisado*, returning to its lair in the trees after a long night of hunting.

When he went to the edge of the forest to relieve himself, the distinctive cinnamon scent of the iceroots strong in his nostrils, the *sahael* stretched to accommodate him, but Maneck took no notice. When he gathered a double handful of berries for his breakfast, the alien showed no interest. Ramon might almost have been alone and bound by his flexible leash to a tree stump. As the hours passed, the memory of the dream faded, the sadness becoming not an emotion, but the memory of one. The conviction he had felt that *any* price would be justified if it turned aside the horror of *gaesu* faded but did not vanish. It was the thought of the monsters, and he knew it.

When he stretched out on the greymoss at the water's edge at midday, his skin warmed by the sun, Maneck made no movement, but the nap he had intended would not come. He wondered if the *sahael* was preventing it.

Tenfin birds and whirlygigs flew through the trees, shouting out at one another and fighting over places for their nests, food for themselves, mates to bear their children. The same petty struggles of all life, everywhere. Larger beasts, hoppers and fatheads, came to the river's edge, glanced incuriously at them, and drank from the water. Fish leaped and fell back. The knot of tension in his belly loosened as he watched it all, able to forget for a moment what he was, what his forced mission was, and how bleak his hopes.

He was still half-lost in his reverie when the other Ramon found them.

SEVEN

The shout had no words to it—only a long, drawn out sound, unmistakably from a human throat. Ramon's heart was racing even before the sound was gone, and Maneck was already moving to the cycle. The *sahael* tugged viciously, pulling Ramon almost faster than he could rise and walk.

"That noise was the man," Maneck said, its voice as calm and steady as if the fate of its people didn't hang in the balance. "You will come."

Ramon didn't bother protesting. He could tell from the color of its flesh and the restless movement of its arms that the alien was agitated. He seemed, after his dream, to know much more about Maneck, but the

knowledge did him no good. The other was out there in the trees, and nothing he could do or say would keep the alien from finding him. Ramon took his place on the sidecar, and, in an instant, with a dizzying lurch, they were airborne.

The search was brief, and the story it told was all too clear. In a small clearing that almost overlooked the river, a tree limb had broken high up, the pale wood standing out from the darkness of the bark like a fresh wound. And there, near where the limb had fallen, a twisted, motionless form—the shirt and trousers Ramon remembered having worn in another life, the workboots angled awkwardly out. The shape of the body hardly made sense. The other Ramon had climbed the tree to survey the land, and the branch supporting him had snapped. He was shattered now, and certainly dead. Maneck landed the cycle ten yards from the fallen man.

"You will remain here," it said, sternly.

Ramon only nodded, his heart heavy as lead. This was the end of his hopes for freedom. The aliens would take him back to their strange, terrible caverns. Perhaps he would be allowed to remain as he was—a man with the memories and spirit of a man, trapped among aliens for the rest of his life. Perhaps they would destroy him as a tool that had outlasted its function. Which would be worse?

Maneck lumbered across the high grass to where the corpse lay. Perhaps, Ramon thought, if he could find a way to start the cycle . . . it was a desperate idea, and pointless. Even if he could have figured out how to fly it, the thing in his neck would no more have allowed him to escape than gravity would let him flap his arms and fly. Maneck reached the body, leaning over it and prodding with its long, slender hands.

Ramon heard a creak in the silence and realized what was happening even before the deadfall dropped from high in the canopy—a log of copperwood twice a man's thickness and at least a hundred kilos in weight, screaming down through leaves and twig-thin branches. Maneck looked up just as the log struck him and bore him to the ground. The pain hit Ramon instantly—it was not so intense as it had been, but it was disorienting and nauseating. He stumbled from the sidecar and tried to walk forward, but the earth seemed to shift and tip. He fell to his knees, aware distantly of a shrieking human voice and a thick, naked form, more like a chimpanzee than a man, that howled in victory as it ran forward. The sharp, dry report of a pistol sounded again and again.

"Help me!" Ramon cried, scrabbling at the *sahael*. "For the love of God, cut this *pinche* thing off of me!"

Through the pain and the haze of tears, Ramon saw the naked man—the other Ramon—shift away from his attack on the fallen alien, then run toward him. He cringed away, expecting assault as much as assistance. But the other knelt, trapping the *sahael* under his knees, and began sawing at it vigorously with his bush knife. Ramon felt the damage as if the fleshy leash were a part of him, but he gritted his teeth until his jaw creaked and forced himself to breathe through the pain.

And then, like turning off a light, it was gone. Ramon lay back, gulping air. His body trembled as if he'd just run a fast mile. The severed end of the *sahael* shifted in the flesh of his neck, withdrawing and then falling

the few inches to the ground with a sound like a cooing pigeon. It skittered away like a live thing until the other speared it with the point of his knife.

"Do I know you?" the other said through labored breaths. "Who the fuck are you?"

Ramon looked at him directly for the first time. He was filthy and unkempt—the light stubble that often darkened his chin was already a moth-eaten beard. Distrust shone in his black eyes. His left hand was wrapped in bloody cloth, and Ramon realized, with a profound sense of vertigo, that in that mess of soiled bandages, a finger was missing. A finger from which he had been born.

But the other Ramon also looked *wrong* somehow. He had expected it to be like looking into a mirror, but it was not. The face he was accustomed to seeing reflected back was different than this. Perhaps, he thought, his features were not so symmetrical as he'd liked to believe. Also the voice was higher than his own, with more of a whine in it. The voice he heard and hated when he heard himself recorded. The other Ramon's bearded chin jutted aggressively.

"I know you can talk," he said. "Who are you? What's your name?"

There was no recognition in the other's eyes. Ramon floundered, searching for a plausible lie. Maneck was the only name he could think of besides his own. He shook his head, forcing his mind to work. If he told the other the truth, he would be killed. He knew this for a certainty, because it was what he would have done himself.

"Manuel," he said. "Manuel Tenorio. I was working survey for the bank out of Fiddler's Jump. The thing over there. It caught me. It was taking me back to its hive."

"Which bank?"

"Sanchez-Perdida," Ramon said, pulling out the first name that came to mind. He wasn't certain that S-P had a branch in Fiddler's Jump. But if he didn't know, neither would the other. The other narrowed his eyes, evaluating, and then slowly nodded.

"I must have seen you at the bars there. You drink at El Pinto Negro?"

"All the time."

"I must have seen you there. Well. You're lucky I found you," he said. "I was prospecting up Tierra Hueso. They blew up my van."

"The thing," Ramon said, gesturing toward Maneck. "Is it dead?"

"It better be," the other said. "I'm out of bullets." They walked over together. The other kept his bush knife at the ready in his right hand, his empty pistol still clutched in the left. Maneck lay unmoving under the deadfall, the whole lower part of its body crushed to a bloody, pulpy paste. The swirling patterns of its skin had stilled, and the hot orange eyes had faded to sightless gray. Bullet wounds made little mouths in the still flesh. No blood flowed from them. The other spat on the corpse of Maneck, *athanai* of his cohort and the last hope of his people, before turning to strip the bloodied clothing from the pile of stones and branches that had imitated a broken body, baiting the trap. Ramon lingered a moment, staring down at Maneck.

Better thee than me, monster, he thought. But still he didn't spit. In a

odd way that surprised and disquieted him, he almost missed Maneck, now that it was over, now that he was free.

After all, Maneck was the only one he'd ever met in his life, except for the thing in the pit. And now the other.

"We have to get back to Fiddler's Jump," the other said as he pulled on his soiled, bloody shirt. "Do you have anything? A gun? A sat finder?"

"No," Ramon said. "The thing took everything I had. It made me wear this. I haven't got anything."

"Well," the other said, "let's see what *it* had."

They ransacked the cycle of strange artifacts—thin tangles of something like wire. The spheres and rods. A pink translucent cube. The strange twined eggbeater weapon that had destroyed the van and the bubbletent. But nothing worked, nothing functioned, no matter how they poked and prodded at it. Ramon couldn't even make the sharp wire end come out of the cylindrical knife. Perhaps it had all died with Maneck.

"What about this?" the other asked, holding out a length of light metal that curved at the edges like a drying leaf.

"I don't know," he said, again.

"Didn't you see the thing use *any* of this?"

"The tube there. It called it *oekh*. It was what it ate."

The other snatched up the tube and threw it hard against a tree.

"I don't care about its food! I need weapons! Or a way to make this thing fly! Why are you making noise if you've got nothing to say?" the other demanded, thrusting his face aggressively much too close, almost nose to nose. Ramon could see the frustration in him, the anger, the desire to strike out and make himself feel better by hurting someone, and felt its twin in his own breast.

"I was a prisoner, not a *chingada* exchange student," he said, stopping just short of calling the other *cabron* or *pendejo* or asshole or any of the other thousand epithets that would have edged them over into a fight. The other's face puckered. Was this what Chulo Lopez had seen that night in Little Dog? It looked less impressive than it felt. This close, he could *smell* the other man, a rank, musky, unwashed reek that he found amazingly unpleasant. His breath huffed into Ramon's face like a blast of foul air, stinking of dead meat. With an effort, Ramon kept his own face still, and refused to rise to the bait.

"Fine," the other said, turning away. "At least help me build a raft. We got to get back to the world before those things find us again."

They worked through the afternoon. The other had already gathered supplies, slowed though he was by his wounds. Together, they braced the wood, bound it with long flexible strips of bark and ice grass and lengths of the alien wire. As they worked, the other told how he had rigged the deadfall, alerted by the plume of smoke from Ramon's cook fire. How he had planted the bait, how he had killed Maneck. Ramon listened as he boasted, fascinated not by the story, but by the man who told it. The delight the other took in his own cleverness was annoying. If Ramon didn't nod or make appreciative noises at the right moment, he would glare at him.

"Killed that fucking thing *dead*," the other said with an air of satisfaction. Ramon made a grunting noise, assent without comment. They finished lashing the last of the planks. The raft was rickety, but it would hold together. "So how long you been in Fiddler's Jump?"

"Eight years," Ramon said, making up the number on the spot.

"Long time."

"Almost since the beginning," Ramon agreed. "You want me to get some food?"

"I can get my own food," the other said. "I'm not a fucking baby. I came five days on foot, catching meals. I don't need some *pinche* Fiddler's Jump banker doing my work for me!"

Ramon frowned, but nodded passively. The other would like nothing better than goading him into a fight, he knew—but he wasn't going to oblige.

"Sorry," he said.

After dinner—sug beetles boiled in riverwater—the other Ramon smoked a cigarette that he didn't offer to share and fell asleep by the glowing embers of the fire, his hand still on his knife. In the morning, they would set out, floating their raft back to civilization. And the aliens would die, victims of *gaesu*.

And what, he wondered, would happen to *him*? When they reached Fiddler's Jump, it wouldn't be possible to pretend that he was really a native of the town. Eight years? He should have said he'd just arrived. Or said he was from some backwater like Los Cuates. And when other people saw them together, it wouldn't be possible to hide their resemblance.

Ramon looked out over the shining face of the water. He was a monstrosity—a made thing. *Ae Euth'eloi*. He touched the place on his throat where the *sahael* had entered him—a disk of numb flesh the size of a New Peso. It had all seemed easy when he had been a prisoner. Now that he was free, he understood the depth of his troubles. He had no place in the world. He was Ramon Espejo, and he was not. He imagined Maneck's metal-and-gravel voice. *To be Ramon and not to be Ramo is aubre. It will be punished*. He chuckled.

"What?" the other said, petulant and half-asleep.

"It's nothing," Ramon said, wrapping the alien cloth closer about him and settling down for sleep himself. "Just remembering something a friend of mine used to say."

EIGHT

Ramon cast his wire into the flowing icy waters that surrounded them. The raft rode high on the river, buoyed-up by the cork-like iceroot logs. Far above, a flapjack—perhaps the same one, perhaps another—folded itself and dove after some hidden prey. The other was more clearly feverish this morning, and weaker. The chill coming off the water was doing him no good. Ramon had left him at the back of the raft to sleep, and most of the morning had passed that way. By this point in its long journey to the

sea, the river was deep and steady—not at all swift as big rivers go, but they had still covered much more ground in these last hours than either man could possibly have on foot, even in their best condition. Fiddler's Jump drew nearer. And then . . . And then he didn't know what. Something had to happen before that did.

"What are you doing?" the other demanded.

"Fishing," Ramon answered.

The other made a derisive grunting sound.

"What does a banker know about fishing?"

"Enough to catch fish."

The other lapsed back into silence. Ramon pulled the wire slowly back to the raft, then cast it out again, letting the rhythm of the movements lull him and the sun warm his back. When he looked around, the other had fallen asleep again, his head resting on his uninjured hand. He looked ill. Part of it was the exhaustion and the fear and the fever, but there was more than that. Ramon could see the sorrow ground in at the corners of the mouth and eyes. He could see the desperation in the shoulders. And he knew them, he recognized them. This is what he was. Smart, resourceful, tough as old leather, but wound tight around his fears and ready to blame everyone but himself. This was what he had always been. Only it took becoming an alien monstrosity to see it. The other's eyes slit open.

"What are you looking at?"

"I thought I heard something back there," Ramon lied. "It was probably just a bird."

He turned back to the fishing, keeping his face turned away from the other, knowing that sooner or later the penny would have to drop, and the less time they spent facing each other, the better the chances of postponing the recognition. But the other didn't return to his sleep.

"You're a funny kind of man," the other said. "How long did those things have you?"

"A couple days, I guess," Ramon said. He could have easily said my whole life or they never really had me. I was never one of them. Any more than I was one of the *colonistas* in Nuevo Janeiro. "It wasn't that bad."

"That thing they put in your neck. That looked pretty bad."

"Yeah. Maybe it was."

"They crippled me," the other said, and there was something almost like gloating in his voice. "But they didn't catch me. Too smart for them! What do you think they are anyway? What're they up to? Did you find anything out about them?"

"I don't know anything for sure. I got the impression that they aren't from this planet, that they came here long ago and have been hiding in that mountain for hundreds of years. Waiting—but waiting for what, I'm not sure. It's hard to figure out. They . . . they don't think like we do."

"We're going to be famous, you know," the other said; he hadn't really been listening . . . "The first men to see aliens! We'll be rich!"

"You think so?"

"I know it."

"Well. Maybe this was the big one after all," Ramon said, trying to keep the acid from his voice.

"What?"

"Nothing," Ramon said. "I was talking to the fish."

For a long moment, they were silent. Ramon shifted, wondering if his repulsive twin had drifted back to sleep, but not wanting to turn and see. Instead, he drew in the fishing wire and cast it out again. Something on his arm caught his attention. A thin white line, jagged and half-formed. The machete scar slowly welling up. What had Maneck said? *You will continue to develop across time.* He touched the thin line of knotting flesh with his fingertips, caressing it as gently as Eleana ever had. His beard was also thickening, his hands becoming rougher. He was becoming more and more like the man who lay behind him. He closed his eyes, torn between relief at seeing his own flesh coming back again and anxiety about what would come—no one would mistake them for different men. No one would even think they were twins—they were too close for that. By the time they reached another human being, they would have the same scars, the same calluses, the same faces and bodies and hair.

The thought was alarming in a way that went deeper than the simple fear of discovery. Some echo stirred in his mind of being the river of the vast and living sea. He had diverged. Maneck had feared it, and it had been right.

"You got a woman?" the other asked.

"Sorry? What?"

"I said, you got a woman?"

"Yeah. I guess."

"You guess? You don't *know*?"

"I guess I don't," Ramon said. "She's . . . she's a good woman, I think. We're a good match at least. But I make her a little crazy sometimes. And she..."

"She's got you whipped, *mi amigo*," the other sneered. "I can hear it in your voice."

"What about you?" Ramon asked, not looking back over his shoulder.

"I got someone I sleep with," the other said. "She's got a mouth on her sometimes, but she's okay. I don't mind fucking her. She's pretty good in bed."

"You love her?"

"What's it to you?"

"I don't think you do."

"And what do *you* know about it?" There was an angry buzz in the other's voice now. Ramon shook his head at it. He didn't have any patience for this sorry bastard. He knew him too well.

"Forget it," he said. "I'm tired and I don't feel like talking anymore."

"Who gives a shit what you want?" the other demanded. It was like they were in a bar. Ramon could feel the rage in his breast, clean and hard and deep. It was why he always fought. It was why he hated people. This greasy, self-centered, puffed-up son of a whore at the other end of the raft was what he hated most in the world. Some new, observing part of his mind made a note of the fact.

"I said I don't want to talk," Ramon said.

"You don't get to say that kind of crap about me and then act like you're so high and mighty you can decide when I can talk and not talk! You think because you got a job in an office somewhere, you're *better* than me? You think that? What do *you* know?"

"I know enough," Ramon said. "I know about how Eleana makes you crazy, nagging all the time. I know about how you asked that chica at Garcia's to dance with you and whether she'd take you in if you left Eleana. Nothing ever came of that, but you *did* ask. Asking means you were thinking about it, and I don't think you'd have done that if you loved her. I think you need her. I think you need her because, without her, you aren't part of anything or anyone. You're just some *pendejo* with a third-class van and some prospecting tools."

It wasn't how he'd thought it would come out, but it would do. It was too late now to go back, and Ramon found that he actually felt good. He'd said it. He'd said it out loud, and he saw now that he'd been thinking it for months. From before the aliens, from before the vat. From before the time when there had been two of them, he'd had this hatred within him. And now it was out. And now he knew who it was for. Whatever was going to happen, let it happen now.

"The thing is, you don't understand flow," Ramon said. "You don't understand what it is to be part of something bigger. And, Ramon, you poor bastard, you aren't ever going to know."

"What the fuck *are* you?"

The words were strangled. Coughed out of a panic-tight throat. Ramon dropped the fishing wire, letting the river take it, and turned. The other was gray beneath his sun-browned skin. His eyes were open so far that Ramon could see the whites all the way around. He had backed to the edge of the raft, backed away until there was no place further to go. Next, Ramon knew, he would attack. And he did still have the knife.

"Jesus Christ," the other whispered. "You're *me*!" He stared in horror for a frozen moment, then fumbled at his belt and pulled out the bush knife.

The silence wasn't total. The river clinked and chuckled around them. Birds or things near enough like them to take the name called from the tops of the trees, flew overhead, skimmed down across the river for a drink. But Ramon and his twin might have been statues, carved of wood and set upon the raft like icons in some old pagan temple. The wounded, debased, frightened little man at the back, his knife shining where the sunlight caught the blade. And at the front, himself, whatever he was. A thing of human flesh created by aliens. Man and not-man, both at the same time, and if this was *aubre*, so be it. He was more than he had been, and he knew it now. He saw it.

And if he was not Ramon Espejo, still there was enough of the mean old bastard in him that he wouldn't go down without a fight.

Perhaps his resolve showed in his face, because as he thought it, the other shrieked and leaped forward. Ramon jumped, not away, not to the side, but forward, stepping into the blow. He brought up his balled fist, sinking his knuckles deep in the other's belly, then butted his forehead

into the bridge of his older twin's nose. But the other had danced back, anticipating the attack. The blade danced.

"You're one of them," the other spat. "You're a monster!"

"Yes. Yes, I am. And I am *still* a better man than you."

Again, the other moved forward, sweeping the air with the blade, forcing Ramon to move back, back, until the raft shifted under the weight of their struggle, and cold water touched his heels.

"You're a thing. You're an abomination and you will die!"

He had been an idiot, letting the other incite him like this. Even fevered, even weak, the other was a fighter, a killer, and he had the weapon. Ramon felt anger growing in his belly, anger at himself and at the other, at the world and at the blind idiot God that had brought him this far, had made this absurdity of his life, and now, it seemed, was prepared to let him die at the hand of his worse self. The other grinned like a wolf, seeing Ramon's defeat before him.

And, for a moment, it was as if Maneck was within him, calm and stolid and phlegmatic. *You are not that person*, its strange grating voice said. The other shouted out again, leaping forward. The knife was ready—if Ramon did what his nature told him, if he jumped into the fight as if they were in an alley outside some midnight bar, he would be gutted like a fish. It was what the other expected him to do. Ramon crouched, but didn't move.

The knife moved slowly as a car wreck; Ramon shifted away to the right, but still pain bloomed in his side. He brought his arm down, pinned the other's hand against him. It drove the knife deeper into his own flesh, but it also trapped his twin against him.

"Come with me, *mi hermano*," Ramon said. "There's something I want to show you."

And he stepped off the edge of the raft.

The water was numbing cold, the glacier still in its blood. Ramon gasped despite himself and earned a throatful of river water. The other thrashed and twisted, and then they were apart, floating. Floating in a bright, flowing river. Ramon noticed the red bloom that came from his side, his blood mixing with the water, becoming a part of it. He was becoming the river.

It would have been easy to let it happen. The living sea called to him, and part of him wanted very much to join it, to become the river completely. But the part of him that was alien remembered the threatened sorrow of *gaesu* and the human part of him refused to be beaten, and together the two parts of himself forced him on. He shifted back, finding the dark form of the raft above him, and kicked against the flow with all his strength. He pulled off the alien cloth and swam naked, the heat and blood pouring out of him.

His hand broke the surface. He clawed at the raw wood, almost too weak to grip it. Each time he pulled himself farther up out of the water, he felt fainter, but he gritted his teeth and tugged until he had a leg up, and then, with one last pull, he was free of the river. He fought to draw air, and then vomited, each spasm shooting pain like a fresh wound through the slit in his side.

The raft rocked as the other also found it. Ramon saw the wounded hand, bandages washed away, scrabbling for purchase. He saw the familiar face, its lips blued already with the fierce cold, struggling to stay above the surface. Ramon moved to the edge of the raft.

"Help me!" the other cried. "*Madre de Dios*, help me!"

Ramon took the other's hand, feeling the fingers weak already with fever and with cold trying to grip his wrist.

"I don't want to die!" the other said. "Please Jesus, I don't want to die!"

"No one does," Ramon said, and pushed as hard as he could. The other yelped and went under again, lost for a long moment beneath the raft. When he emerged on the other side, Ramon could still see him moving, struggling to the last, trying to swim against the flow, beating weakly at the river.

"I'll remember you," he called to his dying twin. "When I'm drinking your beer and sleeping with your woman, I'll remember you. You stupid prick."

The other thrashed in the water frantically, and then went still. His head sank beneath the surface of the river. It didn't come back up.

Was there the faintest of tugs as the other died, as whatever bond was between them broke? Or was it just his imagination? It was impossible to say.

Exhausted, panting, Ramon lay back on the raft. He recognized the sluggishness of hypothermia coming on, but he had nothing to cover himself with. He could only hope that the heat of the sun would be enough to sustain him. Blood still flowed, staining his side and his legs, and he had nothing to staunch it with; he'd just have to hope the wound was shallow enough for it to eventually stop on its own. There were still days to travel between here and Fiddler's Jump, and, sprawled there alone on the makeshift raft, Ramon guessed his chances of surviving that long at even money. Maybe a bit worse. But at least the monsters would live. The fetid, crook-spined *ataruae*, the yellow-fringed *mahadya*. The *kait* would all hatch and sleep warm in their creche. If he died here, if he joined his brother in the river's ice-cold flow, he would at least die Ramon Espejo, hero to monstrosities. He needed to sit up. He would gather his strength and sit up. He only needed to rest here for a moment first. Just a moment.

Consciousness faded.

He was surprised, some time later, to find himself weeping. It was dark around him, and he could not entirely recall who or what he was weeping for. It seemed that someone he loved had died, and that he was responsible, but he could not remember who it was or how he carried that burden.

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Then the world faded again and he found himself floating in darkness. Time passed, punctuated by strange dreams and spikes of fear and panic and shivering. Nothing carried the weight of reality. It might have been minutes or hours or years, passing in the sick non-time of fever. He found himself floating in darkness, aware that he was awake, but not of what had awakened him. He tried to move, but something resisted him, pressing him gently back into place. A hand. A woman's hand against his naked breast.

"Who are you?" she asked again, and he realized that, whoever she was, she had been asking him this for some time.

He moved his lips, swallowed painfully, and, in a hoarse voice, he muttered, "My name is Ramon Espejo. And, *perdoneme, mi amiga*, but that's all I can recall."

NINE

It was summer again before he could really say all was well. He'd broken things off with Eleana as soon as he was strong enough to speak, still in the hospital with his food coming through a white plastic tube straight into his vein like the ghost of the *sahael*. She hadn't believed him at first, thinking, he supposed, that it was just another fight like any of the others. It wasn't until the doctors released him and he went to his own room instead of hers that it sunk in.

She had been like a thunderstorm after that. For weeks, she had left angry notes pinned to his door with knives, screamed at him when they met. After she'd screwed her way through all of his friends and half of his enemies, she seemed to accept that he was gone. Now she only spat on the ground when they chanced to see each other in the street.

The São Paulo colony was a bad place to be poor, though. The bills from his hospital stay were more than he'd make in a year, even if he'd had a working van and his prospecting tools intact. Starting from scratch would have been easier, but Ramon did what he had to do. When the infection had cleared from his mangled side, he worked his strength back and took day-labor jobs in the spaceport or with fishing boats on the warmer coasts. It was easier saving money now that he'd stopped going to bars at night. And in high summer, he took what he had scraped together to Old Sanchez at the outfitter's station.

"Ramon, *mi amigo*, this . . . this is pigshit."

"You try saving up money hauling fish and retarring asphalt," Ramon said. "You got it easy sitting here with your iced tea and a bunch of desperate assholes needing whatever it is you got. I'll trade jobs with you for a week, and I'll have enough money to buy a new van outright."

"Not if I'm the one selling it to you," Old Sanchez said, but he smiled when he said it. "I want to help out. I really do, but this isn't enough for a down payment on the cheapest thing I got."

"What about renting it, then? I'll give you this much, and you let me

rent one of the old vans and some equipment for two weeks. If I get a site that pays out, we can talk about maybe buying then."

"And what happens if you don't find anything?" Old Sanchez asked, which wasn't a no.

"I go haul some more fish until I can rent it again."

Old Sanchez sipped his tea and wiped his hand across his mouth. His eyes shifted, calculating. Ramon sat forward.

"What the fuck happened to you out there, *mi amigo*?" Old Sanchez asked. "You show up naked and half dead, no van, no equipment, and a hole in your side that someone could put a fist in. And now you're all of a sudden sober? You find God out there or something?"

"You really want to know?"

Old Sanchez considered him, and Ramon could see the unease in the old man's expression.

"No," he said. "I get enough evangelical crap already."

"Go forth, *mi hijo*, and sin no more," Ramon said.

"Yeah, okay," Old Sanchez said at last. "You can rent it. But if you wreck it like you did that last one, I'm taking half your wages for the rest of your life."

"Don't worry. Won't happen."

They drew up the agreement—Old Sanchez wasn't stupid; all the legal forms would be followed in case something did go wrong—and Ramon signed away his meager savings with something like euphoria.

"You really want to get back out there, don't you?"

"Yeah," Ramon said. "This being around people so much. I don't like it."

"Not even that girl down at Llano's?"

"Maria? She's all right. But she's not . . ." Ramon made a gesture that encompassed sky and land and ocean. *She is not the world.*

"All right. Here's the keys. You can have the red van over there. There's already gear loaded. But you get it back in two weeks. And this time, you better have some clothes on."

"Yeah. Don't worry. This is going to be the big one."

It was a warm day in the second month of June, and the van hummed beneath him as the miles flowed away below him. Greenglass country glittering, the flocks of wool-elk and bigheads scattering as he passed overhead. The *Océano Tétrico*. The handful of weathered wooden ships that were the fishing fleet of Fiddler's Jump, and then north, along the thin silver-white band that was the Rio Embudo, where he had almost died twice. Somewhere in that flow—eaten by fish, his bones washed out to sea—the other Ramon had by now become part of the world in a way that could never be undone. Ramon touched his brow in a sign of respect for the dead.

"Better thee than me, *cabron*," he said.

The clearing was easy to find. The months of deep winter or else the aliens had scoured away all trace of his first landing there. He eased the van down, shut off the lift tubes and lit a cigarette. The scheme was simple. He'd left notes about what had happened—Maneck, the other Ramon dead somewhere in the river, and, most importantly, the exact location of the refuge—hidden in his things. The aliens might not understand the

idea of *insurance*, but he was willing to teach them. And then he could make his deal.

The aliens would tell him where they didn't want humanity exploring, any other refuges that might exist, and he would file claims in Diegotown that made the sites look worthless and dead. In return, they would tell him where two or three really *good* sites were—places where mines could be built with every nugget of ore leaving a few coins in Ramon's pocket. And then let the monsters do what they wanted to do. It didn't matter to him. Let them hide inside their hill until the end of time, if that's what they wanted.

Or perhaps eventually, in time, he could talk them into coming *out*, eh? Convince them, from his unique perspective that straddled both worlds, that being discovered didn't mean that they would all have to die. Wouldn't that be something? If he could do *that*, he wouldn't even need the *pinche* mines to be famous and rich. And it would be a good thing for the aliens, too, for whom he'd gradually come to feel a strange kind of sympathy; no one, not even alien monsters, should have to hide inside in the dark all the time when there was a world like this one to be out and around in.

He took in a deep lungful of smoke, remembering Maneck's fear of cancer preventing them from fulfilling their *tatecredue*. It was a risk, of course. Maybe a big one. There was no knowing what these bastards would think or do. Stranger than a *norteamericano*, or even the Japanese. Maybe they'd just kill him, not caring or not understanding about the insurance. Who could know? But life was a risk. That was how you knew you were living.

The cliff face was back exactly as it had been. He couldn't be certain, but he thought that even the individual stones had been set back in place. Here was the boulder he'd hidden behind. And there, in the place that made the most sense, was the site he'd placed the coring blast.

"Hai!" he shouted, his hands cupped around his mouth. "Monsters! Hai! Come out! Another monster wants to talk with you! Or do I need to blow this wall down again?"

Ramon stepped back. High above and to the south, two flapjacks rippled in the high atmosphere, circling each other. The sun overhead was warm as blankets. For a long moment, Ramon felt something like dread in his belly. What if they'd decided that his escape had constituted *gae-su* after all? What if inside the mountain there was nothing but the dead?

And then, far above, the mountainside irised open, and a thing flew out, straddling a device that was for all the world like a flying cycle. The pain in his belly eased. Ramon raised his hands and waved them over his head, drawing the monster's attention, calling it down. It circled once, as if uncertain.

Ramon took another drag of his cigarette, oddly reassured by the alien's hesitance, and waited for it to descend. ○

NO SURRENDER?

IRON COUNCIL
by China Miéville
Del Rey, \$24.95
ISBN: 0345464028

NEUTRINO DRAG
by Paul Di Filippo
Four Walls Eight Windows,
\$15.95
ISBN: 1568583001

STABLE STRATEGIES AND OTHERS
by Eileen Gunn
Tachyon Publications, \$14.95
ISBN: 189239118X

MASTER OF NONE
by N. Lee Wood
Warner Aspect, \$14.95
ISBN: 0446693049

There is something serendipitous about find myself sitting here in New York the day after the end of the Republican National Convention writing this essay after four days running with the demonstrations, and the first novel at hand is the one I finished reading during them, China Miéville's *Iron Council*.

This is the third book in his "New Crobuzon" series, the first being *Perdido Street Station*, which I lauded in these pages, and the second being *The Scar*, which I missed reading due to the indifference of publishers in supplying galleys and review copies, which seems to have become endemic.

So don't blame me if I haven't reviewed your book, and as a novelist it scares me, as well it should. I mean, if I'm not getting review copies of *your* books, you'll pardon me for worrying about who in hell is getting review copies of *mine*. Then, too, this puts me in a mood not to spend my own money buying their product to review, made worse by the chronic reviewer's attitude that freebies are his birthright.

Nevertheless I did buy *Iron Council*, for the simple reason that, whether I would end up reviewing it or not, I wanted to read it. What greater praise for a writer than that a hardened freebie hound would actually pay money to read his latest?

For the past four days, I've spent time with demonstrations against the Coronation of King W, not the official ones which sought and were granted permits, but the unofficial direct action ones, which neither sought nor received license from the Crown to attempt their revolutionary acts.

And what was I reading in the meantime? A novel that is forthrightly the story of a revolution.

Iron Council is a forthright and forthrightly passionate political novel, a revolutionary socialist novel at that, and, by my reading at least, at the very least generically Marxist, or arguably anarcho-sindicalist, or some combination thereof.

Certainly in broad general terms—the terms that go way back to the Paris Commune at least—*Iron*

Council is the story of a popular anarcho-socialist revolution against a corporate capitalist state, and Miéville is out there waving the red—or is it black?—flag on the barricades with his fictional revolutionaries.

This is that *rara avis*, a literarily successful political advocacy novel, and what it is advocating is a collectivist anarchist-socialist society, to be achieved, if at all, by revolutionary violence and popular uprising.

It is also the third volume of a trilogy or, gah, perhaps an open-ended series. And it is fantasy, not science fiction. If it were not the third volume of a fantasy series, the first two of which established the writer's major reputation, it would have had about as much chance of being published in the United States as Fidel Castro has of being invited to a state dinner at the White House.

The universe of *Iron Council* is completely disconnected from our own. The story takes place on a planet called "Bas-Lag" somewhere somewhen and there is no attempt to explain or even hint at where or when. The tech level is vaguely if mildly retro, ranging to Gatling guns, dirigibles, trains, and elevated metros. Magic is another gamut of technology ranging from failed street spells to golems and sprites and non-material powers with the world-wrecking puissance to turn Edmond Hamilton green with envy. Magic and technology boil in the same bouillabaisse to the point where they blend into each other. There are no discernable rules or parameters. Magicks not only are pulled out of any available hat to suit the plot moment, but the rabbits pull more of them out of their

own hats as they emerge into the story.

Humans are the dominant species, at least in New Crobuzon. But alien species abound to the point where they can't even be counted, let alone taxonomically sorted out, and new ones pop up previously unintroduced at every turn.

New Crobuzon is an immense sprawling, brawling city that seems to be the most economically and politically dominant political entity in this world. It owes much to the London of Dickens and Michael Moorcock's *Mother London*, with an overlay of Paris on the verge of the Paris Commune, smoldering with pre-revolutionary ire.

This is not conventional genre fantasy in which the game is to establish known rules of magicks that work, build a consistent world inhabited by known or at least pre-removed creatures, species, and entities, and let the story unfold within a universe that coheres logically.

This is something else. *Iron Council* is fantasy that makes no pretense that it is anything but a literary construct at the arbitrary service of the story being told within it. A story that forthrightly proclaims its inspirational revolutionary purpose.

New Crobuzon is a kind of fascist state with a democratic face; there are elections for office, but only a small number of people vote, chosen by a supposedly random lottery—Al Capone elected Mayor of Chicago by paying attention to the polls and having the electorate jury-rigged by experts from Florida tweaking the results of the numbers game accordingly.

Instead of jails, there is the enlightened penal practice of "Re-making." Convicted criminals, in-

stead of receiving extended room and board at the expense of the state, are turned into changeling monsters, the punishment artistically designed to fit the crime, and turned loose as a convenient source of an underclass and slave labor.

One major thread of the novel is the story of Ori, lowly laborer and barroom revolutionary, on his rise to political consciousness, more commitment to ever more radical revolutionary action groups, and a pivotal plot point during the full-bore revolution; a piece of proletarian fiction out of the 1930s.

Another major thread is a weird kind of western. A visionary capitalist robber baron straight out of the American mid-nineteenth century sets out to build a transcontinental railroad through the vast terra incognita of Bas-Lag beyond the satrapies of New Crobuzon. This is being done with roughnecks, cactus-men, and assorted other wage slaves, but also with an abundant supply of Remade slave labor confined in pens when they are not working, a kind of ultimate bottomline lumpenproletariat, feared, despised, and looked down upon by the humans and aliens who are at least getting paid.

Well, the railway company dives into the red and stops paying its workers, they strike, the Remade join them, and together they commandeer the train, form a Collective, the Iron Council of the title, and flee slowly into the wilderness by laying tracks ahead of their train and pulling up the rails behind them.

Instrumental in this is Judah Low, a naturalist who learned the art, or craft, or magic, of golem making from the non-human swamp dwellers as their habitat was being

destroyed by the manifest destiny of the railroad. Instrumental also is Cutter, lone-wolf bushranger and Judah's sometime lover.

The Iron Council chugs off into the unknown, to become an urban legend in pre-revolutionary New Crobuzon later on in the middle of the Viet Nam War—whoops, the war between New Crobuzon and the Tesh—being fought a long way off for reasons too obscure for the populace thereof to really follow in the censored establishment press, or in the revolutionary broadsheets that abound.

The revolution breaks out in New Crobuzon. Cutter fetches Judah from the city to return to the Iron Council, a mission to bring it back from the mists of legend to inspire the revolutionaries. They then commence an odyssey through the increasingly bizarre wildernesses in search of the Iron Council, along with various sidekicks. The last section of the book is the full story of the revolution in New Crobuzon, as the Iron Council lays track back from whence it came to the rescue.

You think you know how such a story must end, especially within a political and passionately revolutionary novel, but it doesn't. Far be it from me to give away the ending even if I could, which I can't, for it involves magic so convoluted and abstract that I can't even understand it, not that I really believe Miéville intends me to, but the thematic confusion of it at least must be danced around.

Without giving too much away, the Iron Council does and does not arrive in New Crobuzon, and what hope it ends up providing is a literary act of romantic magical pres-
titigation.

Maybe Miéville has adopted an

apocryphal slogan from the Irish Republican Army: "Now is the time for a futile gesture." Maybe this is Mao's notion of the permanent revolution, that it is the process and zeitgeist of this neverending story that is the true revolution, not the end product.

It does give the novel a certain tragic nobility, just as what raises *Iron Council* from the didactically polemic political novel to true literature is that Miéville has not left his sense of irony behind in his rush to the barricades. It is a dénouement you can legitimately argue with yourself about, and not only on the intellectual level but the emotional; it is emotionally disturbing, and that is perhaps the author's intent.

And unlike most political novels, the personal emotional level is not only there but front and center, and thoroughly integrated with the great events in the macrocosm. Up until the ending, this is what kept me forgiving Miéville's literary way with magic.

There's magic all over the place, deuses and demons are conjured up ex machina at every plot turn, and there are no rules or regulations. Well okay, maybe you can accept such a situation in a trek through the unknown and even a war story, but when the dénouement resorts to conjuring the biggest Deus Ex Machina of all out of Einsteinian four-space, it breaks the formal parameters of the literary construct itself. It violates even surrealist logic, and for me, at least, on an emotional level.

Which retrospectively calls into question why there is magic in the first place. Miéville's use of magic is of the "he assembled a blaster out of toothpicks and baling wire"

variety, just like full-bore post-modern space opera, and his story takes place on an alien planet to boot, so he could just as easily have written *Iron Council* as science fiction, since the science in a certain species of the stuff is as much pure bullshit as anyone's magic.

Moreover, it would have better served the revolutionary goal of the novel, for while the game of fantasy is to play with the impossible, the game of SF, even post-modern space opera, is to at least pretend the story takes place sometime somewhere within our own universe. Therefore, if literarily successful, it does more to inspire the reader with the subversive notion that what is advocated is possible and thus can aid in calling it into being.

So why wasn't *Iron Council* written as science fiction?

The question is easy enough to answer if one is willing to descend into the down and dirty of publishing economic determinism:

So it wouldn't be published as science fiction, stupid. So it could be published at all. Advocating a violent collectivist revolution in a disconnected fantasy universe where it can maybe be perceived as just a literary game is dicey enough, but doing it in a science fiction novel where it would cut too close to home reality would, under the present political situation in the United States, probably make it unpublishable, and if published, result in an unfriendly visit from the boys from Homeland Security.

Science fiction is being driven into the tar pits of extinction commercially, at least in the United States, and it's not doing too well in Britain either, undone by its own generosity and the commercial success of its media versions.

When the successful mass market publication of the Tolkien novels rescued fantasy from those self-same commercial tar pits, publishers stuck it in their "SF" lines, principally because most of the people they were commissioning to write it were their science fiction writers, who had the tools to reinvent fantasy as a commercial genre.

When the Science Fiction Writers of America debated whether to accept fantasy as a membership credential and candidate for Nebula Awards, the hard science fiction boys warned that bad things would come of it.

They were right. Righter than they thought.

Today it is the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America and the product of the membership, when it is not novelizations of films, TV shows, and computer games, is dominantly fantasy. The readership for literarily ambitious science fiction, as defined by sales figures, was always elite, like the readership for literarily ambitious fiction in general. Fantasy came back on the coat-tails of science fiction in the 1960s and 1970s, but the "SF" boom of the 1970s and 1980s was really a fantasy boom more than anything else.

In retrospect, we can see that this was masked by the lift given to science fiction itself by *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and the dominance of "sci-fi" in Hollywood that followed. The rising tide lifted all ships, only some not as far as was thought at the time. "Sci-fi" media tie-ins, beneficiaries of multimillion dollar commercials reaching multimillion person audiences, outsold the bejesus out of free-standing science fiction even more so than fantasy.

Today with the economics and

tech of special effects having progressed to the point where you can show anything you can dream up within a reasonable production budget, what mass audience there was for science fiction has been sucked up into films and TV shows and computer games.

Major publishers seem to be in the process of dropping literarily ambitious science fiction from their SF lines. I see the best minds of my generation and the ones that followed surrendering into small press publication in order to be published at all, or adapting their talents to fantasy, or in my case historical fiction—to earn a living, to be sure—but also to reach a readership of any meaningful size.

Even publishing superstars like William Gibson and Neal Stephenson, who made the reputations and put up the numbers that have allowed them to do it with science fictional novels published as such by the usual suspects, have not only snakedanced out of SF genre publishing, but, at least for a while, have stopped writing science fiction. And any number of writers who thought they had long since established secure reputations as major science fiction writers have at least found themselves unable to secure major imprint publication for major work. I will not embarrass these luminaries by naming them, but I will embarrass myself by admitting that I am one of them.

But two new small press books embarrass no one but the majors who didn't publish them.

Paul Di Filippo's collection *Neutrino Drag* was published by Four Walls Eight Windows, an outfit on the interface between large small press and small independent main-

stream house. Hardly any of these remain, eaten as they have been as imprints by the four massive conglomerates that dominate the industry.

And this is a step up for Di Filippo, previously published by unequivocal small presses. What does this mean in terms of readership? Well, when I gave up on trying to place *He Walked Among Us* with major publishers, I investigated possible small press publication. When I inquired as to sales figures, I was told with pride by some of the best of them that sometimes they sold as much as one thousand copies, and as for advances, well, er . . .

So I decided, pathetic as it was, to make an on-demand printing deal, which allowed me to reserve conventional volume rights against the advent of better days, or convincing Robin Williams to play the part of his life as the comedian from the future, and wait for the miracle to come.

Four Walls Eight Windows is not Paul Di Filippo's miracle, but it is a step up into professional commercial publication. The question is not only why has it taken so long, but why wasn't Di Filippo a major literary power a decade ago?

The stories in *Neutrino Drag* sequence in a reverse literary retrospective, beginning close to the full flower, and ending with early work, a dangerous structuring that only Di Filippo would have the loony-tunes chutzpah to adopt. But crazy he was not, for *Neutrino Drag* demonstrates that he has been one of the half-dozen best and most original short story writers in the genre almost from the outset. He is also the author of novels the absence of whose titles from Nebula and Hugo nominations dishonors the

awards, also obscured in small press publication.

Coulda shoulda been the champ in his proper division. So what is a heavyweight doing in the feather-weight ring?

Now readers of this magazine will know that Paul is an avid champion of the small press, and we can hope against cynical reason that this is a path he has chosen out of idealistic monkish dedication to the cause rather than major publishing obtuseness. But what about Eileen Gunn?

Her first collection, indeed her first solo volume publication of any kind, *Stable Strategies*, was published by something called Tachyon Publications. In days of yore, one learned the craft and established a reputation as a writer in the short story form, in anthologies and magazines first, and then a publisher could be found for a first novel. A first publication as a story collection was rare, and when it happened, principally when the writer decided that novel length was not their métier, it was disguised as a novel. *The Martian Chronicles* is not an novel, folks.

Gunn would seem to have followed the latter path, except that *Stable Strategies* has not been packaged as a novel. And not by a major publisher.

Is this a stable strategy?

A peculiarly apropos question, for the not-quite-title story, "Stable Strategies For Middle Management," is not only Gunn's best known and most anthologized story, but a not-quite-hilarious send-up of middle management politics within an advertising agency, inspired and informed by Gunn's previous incarnation as middle management at Microsoft.

The point of which for present purposes being that without even knowing anything at all about Gunn's work history, this story itself makes it clear that this is a writer with general business street-smarts, not likely to have opted to make a debut in volume form with an unabashed short story collection from a small press publisher without knowing beforehand what they were going to do with it.

Stable Strategies arrived chez moi with a professional PR release and a professional eight-by-ten photo of the author, the package sent via Federal Express and giving the impression of the sort of slick press kit I used to get from studios and production companies when I was a film critic.

What this means, at least to me, is that Tachyon Publications has spent more money launching this book than the so-called major SF lines spend on anything beyond their seasonal lead. And unless they are completely out of their minds, they intend to get the money back and turn a profit on top of it. Which means they must sell something like five thousand trade books, which means they have to get out something more than that, which would seem to mean they have found ways and means to cobble together such distribution.

Very interesting.

Stable Strategies is straightforwardly a collection of short science fiction. They are as a whole very good science fiction stories, the title story really outstanding, that display a wide range and considerable literary skill, but always well within the parameters of the science fiction genre, many of them entirely successful on a literary level but likely to be rather incomprehensi-

ble to anyone new to the literature.

Indeed, the longest piece in the book, "Green Fire," a collaboration with Andy Duncan, Pat Murphy, and Michael Swanwick, is a World War II alternate reality story about something like the famous "Philadelphia Experiment," with the main characters being Robert A. Heinlein, L. Sprague de Camp and Isaac Asimov, who in fact were stationed together during the war. Here we have four of the top short SF writers, alas also more and more reduced to semi-professional publication, coming together to write a novella that would have worked just as well without these ultimate Tuckerisms for any readership but, well, the fans.

Literarily, this may be close to condition terminal, but it would seem that apparently commercially savvy people are betting more money than the conventional SF lines bet on most of their books that there is a readership in the neighborhood of five thousand sales for a really good first collection of science fiction stories, and that they know how to get the books to it.

Which is more than can be said for trade books published by so-called major SF lines, which count themselves lucky to get out fifteen thousand copies of most science fiction in mass market, when they can distribute a mass market edition at all.

So what is a major publisher and what is a small press?

It's now unfortunately easy enough to say that a major house is an imprint of one of a handful of giant publishing conglomerates and a small press is anything else. But in days of yore, there were any number of independent houses

playing in the big leagues, SF and otherwise—Doubleday, Ballantine, Knopf, Scribner's, Putnam, and so forth, and they were the first division. They've just about all been gobbled up, but why can't new ones arise?

The answer used to be that they had no means of getting mass market paperback distribution, but that was when a monthly SF mass market lead had a print run of one hundred thousand copies, and what with the collapse of mass market distribution, that tail no longer wags the trade dog. Trade publication is where it's now at for anything other than blockbusters, and in this sphere, with a little more capital than small press publishers have yet shown, it may be possible for something like Tachyon Publications to evolve itself into the sort of thing that used to be simply an independent publisher, period.

It had better be. If it isn't, literary science fiction, and, in the end, science fiction period, is doomed to a dwindling afterlife in so-called "semi-prozines" and amateur small press editions which count a thousand readers as success. Aside from the impossibility of making even the grubbiest living writing such stuff even at warp speed, it means that even the most dedicated literary artist possessed of a vast personal fortune is going to be driven elsewhere for lack of a creatively and emotionally sustaining readership.

And then not just the commercial viability of science fiction will be lost, but the literature itself.

We had better start thinking about *what* will be lost. Everyone knows what "fiction" means. But of late I have come to believe that what we generally mean by the

"science" in "science fiction" is not that which we have been arguing about for over three quarters of a century.

That has usually come down to "hard science fiction" versus "soft science fiction," i.e., fiction in which the science is that of the physical realm versus fiction in which the science is that of the cultural or psychological realm, leading into the tiresome dispute as to whether sociology, psychology, linguistics, anthropology, and so forth are, or even can be, sciences at all.

Let's leave that sterile horseshit behind and consider "science" as a worldview. Deeper even than the scientific method is the conviction that reality has a knowable nature, that all of creation is of a consistent pattern, that it is all interrelated, that what is is real, and what is real is ultimately knowable, and that the supernatural is therefore a contradiction in terms.

This, I am now prepared to contend, is the root metaphysical assumption of all true science fiction. And in literary terms, it means that all true science fiction is centered on the interaction of the external surround—physical, political, cultural, linguistic, anything and everything—with the lives and consciousness of the characters.

If it does this, and there is any speculative element in the externals of the fictional universe at all, it is true science fiction, and if it does not, it is not true science fiction. Period.

Fantasy can deal with the interaction of external realm and consciousness too, but since that species of external surround must incorporate discontinuities in the coherent consistent pattern—that is, magic—it cannot do what sci-

ence fiction does. Which is to incorporate the events of the story and the world in which they take place into the realm of the reader's psychological possible.

In literary terms, fantasy requires no suspension of disbelief because no belief is required. Whereas science fiction must *create* suspension of disbelief.

But *why* must science fiction suspend disbelief?

Factor out the double negative and the answer becomes obvious: because science fiction must *create* belief.

Belief that its characters, however altered their states of consciousness, however evolved or devolved or alien, inhabit a fictional universe that, however far in the future or far away or both, *could* in the future or far away or even right now be contiguous with the reality that the reader inhabits.

Fantasy just can't do this. If it does, by definition, it isn't fantasy.

Consider just how unique and powerful a not only literary but transliterary effect science fiction can produce because of this that nothing else can.

Science fiction can envision not just technology and science beyond that presently existing in the universe of the reader, but cultures evolved beyond our own, and create a belief in the reader that such things are possible, indeed *must* demonstrate that they cohere with the realm of the possible in order to do so.

And if one believes that something is possible and it really is, one can be moved to attempt to make it so. Thus science fiction is not only a visionary literature that can transcend the culture in which it is created, but a transformation-

al literature that can, and has from time to time, evolved those cultures onward.

An inherently revolutionary literature, in the macrocosm and the microcosm. For while it is said that no consciousness can comprehend a consciousness evolved beyond its own, science fiction readers are gifted with that comprehension all the time by writers who create such fictional characters. And by inhabiting the consciousness of such characters, armed with the belief that they exist in the realm of the possible, cannot readers aspire to attain the next level?

A revolutionary literature. A visionary literature. A transformational literature.

The one and the only.

In preparation for the writing of this essay, I was constrained to ask myself whether it was possible to write visionary transformational *fantasy*. Did such fiction exist? I came up dry. Is such fiction even theoretically possible?

I would love to have as many people as possible write it and prove me wrong, but I don't think it is. In the terms I'm talking about, if it does it, it's science fiction. I once wrote an essay for a teaching anthology called "Rubber Science," the major thrust of which was that all the so-called "science" in science fiction is really pseudo-science, stuff made up by the writer with literary care that it not be discontinuous with the reader's realm of the possible. And that applies to evolved states of consciousness, too.

A visionary literature. A transformational literature. A means evolved by western evolutionary culture to further evolve itself.

This is what is being lost.

What a ghastly loss this would be

is all too easily read from the states of human cultures that have never evolved a visionary art form to perform this function—Middle Eastern cultures frozen in retro Islamic patterns; China, which reached a pinnacle and then stagnated for over a thousand years; Egypt, gone to pyramids and dust; the glory that was You Name It. If you have no means of imagining and communicating a vision of something above and beyond the present state, you end up with a culture with no means of even conceptualizing it, let alone calling it into being.

This is why the dominant culture on this planet is the so-called West, more properly the globalized culture, for this is the deep force beneath the very notion of cultural progress itself, and this is what has enabled the only culture on Earth that somehow developed a means of doing so to dominate the globe for better and for worse. And no culture that lacks the force is going to be able to compete with one that has it, let alone make things better.

If you are protesting that this is a mighty karmic load to drop on writers struggling to keep their heads above water, you are right.

Tough shit.

Very tough shit indeed, but there you have it.

This is the situation.

What are we going to do about it?

To be brutally honest, I don't know. After all, *He Walked Among Us*, my major effort at dealing with all of the above on a fictional level, the first meta-science fiction novel, as it has been called, can't find meaningful publication, I have no heart for writing such stuff into a vacuum again, and I've been enjoying writing historical novels, finding that they allow me to get closer

to the core of what I try to be about than fantasy or the contemporary novel.

Often enough of late, I've been wondering whether I should even continue to write these columns. Most of the SF publishers don't seem to think it's worth the postage, and maybe I've been at it too long and lost my positive critical perspective. Or maybe the situation really is too depressing to continue to contemplate.

At such times I feel like either a grumbling old fart muttering about a lost Golden Age or the youngest punk on the barricades. Maybe I should do a Tinkerbell. Tell me you want me to go on and maybe I will. Tell me to shut up and maybe I'll be grateful.

But whenever I get to this point something happens. A writer of a marvelous book I've reviewed tells me I was the only critic who really got it. An editor tells me that I was the only critic who even *did* review a worthy book. A close writer friend tells me I can't stop because no one else is doing what I'm doing.

Or I read a novel like *Master of None* by N. Lee Wood published under these devolved circumstances.

If you think I've been getting too personal herein, you ain't seen nothing yet. N. Lee Wood happens to be my ex, and she not only didn't want me to mention it, but didn't want me to review her novel at all, and now I'm probably going to perform the amazing feat of pissing off an author by using a favorable review of her novel to make a point that needs making.

Sorry, Lee, but I gotta do it.

Because no one else will. And I've not been able to find another recent science fiction novel that will so serve.

Master of None is a classical science fiction novel. By that I do not mean that is one of the hyperbolically blurbed "instant classics" that abound, but that it is a novel written in the classical science fiction mode.

We are in what I guess would be deemed the medium-far future. An interstellar civilization and economy connected by "Worms," aka wormholes, more or less, the latest version of the classical FTL fudge factor that must be employed in any science fiction novel set in an interstellar culture with meaningful interstellar commerce.

Here the Worms, tech conveniently left behind for story purposes by some vanished higher civilization, have been engineered by humans into something like interstellar container freighters, also carrying passenger containers. But the passengers cannot enter the Worm itself. Only "Pilots," genetically engineered by the Vanar, can survive within their warped space-time.

Thus the Vanar control or at least dip their wick into all interstellar commerce and travel. Vanar is the richest planet in human space by far. And the Vanar have chosen to isolate their world from the rest of humanity. No one is allowed to visit except for diplomatic purposes, and then under tightly restricted conditions. And no men, ever.

Nathan Crewe is a botanist determined to make his academic reputation, and maybe even secure tenure somewhere, by publishing the first paper on Vanar flora studied in situ. He makes a deal that turns out to be dirtier than it seems to get illegally dumped on Vanar, knowing next to nothing about the self-isolated culture and assuming

that the worst thing that can happen to him is deportation.

He is very wrong.

A classical science fiction set-up for a story that could be told in no other literary mode.

Nathan finds out just how wrong he is just about as soon as he hits the ground. He's immediately arrested, told he's stuck on Vanar for the rest of his life, and thrown in the local version of the slammer.

Vanar, it turns out, is a planet run entirely by women. Men are not slaves, but they have no legal civil rights, and are not even allowed to hold property. The story of *Master of None* is that of Nathan Crewe's path from the lowest depths to key figure in the complex political over-story and his personal and political triumph—well, sort of.

Oh yes, you've read this sort of thing before, and many times—which is to my point, for you haven't had the opportunity to read much of it lately, and certainly not on this level of serious intent. *Master of None* is a novel about gender and culture, harkening back to a literary discussion thereof within the literature a decade and more back with the likes of Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, and Suzy McKee Charnas, and even with a contribution of my own from the male side, *A World Between*, but long since interrupted.

This is a subspecies of the classical science fiction novel that seemed to have disappeared already until this one. *Master of None* is among the best of them, but it seems to have emerged from a time warp.

Vanar is run by a few matriarchal families-cum-corporations, feudal capitalism of a kind. Men are boy toys, courtesans, or polyandric husbands, pawns in dynastic

fun and power games, at least on the levels where such things go on. The legal system has its kangaroo aspects. But Vanar society also has its utopian aspects. Physical violence is virtually unknown, partly because, according to Wood at least, most of it is perpetrated by men, but also because even a punch in the nose is a serious felony. No one goes without food or shelter; if necessary these are provided gratis, if minimally, by what passes for the state.

Master of None faithfully and rigorously adheres to the formal and extrapolative parameters of the classical science fiction novel. That is what *makes* it a classical science fiction novel. A worthy classical science fiction novel fully appreciable only by the readership of the same sort of science fiction written by Poul Anderson, the Ursula K. Le Guin of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Heinlein of a certain period, among several generations of others.

You start with a speculative premise, extrapolate a believable society from it, and tell a story within it that is emotionally gripping on a personal level, and elucidates your thematic points on a cultural level.

This is what Wood does here. This is at the very least the armature of any good literary science fiction. All sort of bells and whistles may be hung on it, but even if they are brilliant, without this classical formal armature, the believability of the novel creaks, and groans, and usually collapses.

The key is what is generally called "world-building." If you don't build a believable world, you can't really write a believable science fiction novel in the sense of convincing readers that the fictional world

could exist in a reality contiguous with their own.

Wood does the job right here. Just about everything on Vanar is rendered in full colorful detail. The ecology. The botany. Interior decor. The complex detail and its ceremonial import of items of dress. The tech. Even the Vanar language, whose deliberately complex grammar, in the manner of full Japanese with its plethora of status verb endings, is a powerful means of social control. It is suggested in such detail that if you can't really understand it, you are at least put in the position of Nathan arduously trying. Nor is psychological contiguity to the reader's own reality scanted, for Vanar society, like our own, like any culture that is not a schematic utopia or dystopia, has its good and evil aspects that arise not from violation of the cultural norms, but from the nature of the culture itself.

When you read *Master of None*, you are fully there, and where you are is someplace that you can fully believe may exist at some time in the universe you inhabit. Classical science fiction.

And like all successful classical science fiction that goes a literary step further, the step that sometimes has the hard SF boys grumbling about "soft science fiction," the heart of *Master of None*, in many senses of the word, is not the world-shaking events in the macrocosm, but the evolution of Nathan's consciousness within his internal microcosm as he struggles against, and yes, adapts, to the bending of his gender role by Vanar culture, and the bringing together of both aspects of the story in a climax that is satisfying on both a thematic and personal level.

Successful classical science fiction. Perhaps nothing more in terms of reaching a so-called "mainstream audience," but nothing less either, and therefore worth having in absolute literary and cultural terms for its own sake.

Something I fear we may not have much longer.

I risk provoking the ire of the general reader and the author in question by considering a novel with which I cannot deny some sort of personal connection because I have found no other current science fiction novel to discuss in a manner that makes my point. Because this kind of classical science fiction is hardly being published any more.

And the point is that classical science fiction—while it may not be or ever have been or ever can be the cutting or crossover edge—is and always has been and must be the central armature of the genre, in the absence of which the whole literary structure built up over

decades by the lives' work of our literary collectivity will collapse into the tarpits of "science fantasy" and tie-ins to movies, TV shows, and video games.

That I could find no more neutral exemplar to make this point, though I had abundant reason to try, is to the point, too.

Which is that this is the sort of novel that is now being squeezed from commercial viability in the so-called "major" SF lines and into small press publication, a process more than half completed, and later, via the inevitable discouragement of being able to approach anything like its natural audience, into literary extinction.

How to prevent this?

I don't really know.

But one thing I do know is that playing the current publishing game according to the rules of the Marquis of Queensberry won't do it.

If Tinkerbelle is going to live, she needs a revolution. ○



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- 11-13—**StellarCon**. For info, write: Box 4, EUC, Univ. of NC/Greensboro, Greensboro NC 27412. Or phone: (336) 294-8041 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) stellarcon.org. (E-mail) stellarcon@yahoo.com. Con will be held in: Greensboro NC (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Downtown Marriott. Guests will include: J. Wurtz, D. Maitz.
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- 11-13—**Anime Detour**. animedetour.com. Ramada Inn Airport and Thunderbird Convention Center, Bloomington MN.
- 11-13—**PortmeiriCon**. portmeiricon.com. Portmeirion UK. "The Prisoner" TV show (held where the show was filmed).
- 11-13—**MECon**. mecon.org.uk. meconbelfast@yahoo.com. Senior Common Room, Queen's University, Belfast UK.
- 13-20—**Supertrek**. (866) 456-1263. registration@supertrek.com. NCL's Pride of America. Cruise to Hawaii.
- 16-20—**IAFA**. lafa.org. Airport Wyndham, Ft. Lauderdale FL. Rucker, Aldiss, Kessel, Broderick. Academic conference.
- 18-20—**LunaCon**. lunacon.org. Sheraton, Meadowlands NJ (near NY City). The traditional New York con.
- 24-28—**NorWesCon**, Box 68547, Seattle WA 98168. (206) 270-7850. SeaTac Doubletree. A. D. Foster, Bishop, Doherty.
- 24-28—**SwanCon**, Box G429, Perth WA 6841, Australia. swancon.com. Emerald Hotel. C. de Lint, M. Harris, G. Watson.
- 25-27—**ConDor**, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92175. condorcon.org. Mission Valley Marriott.
- 25-28—**UK Nat'l. Con**, 4 Burnside Ave., Sheffield S8 9FR, UK. +44 (0) 114 281-0674. paragon2.org.uk. Hinckley UK.
- 25-28—**NZ Nat'l. Con**, Box 13574, Johnsonville, Wellington, NZ. icon.sf.org.nz. West Plaza. O. S. Card, B. Geradts.
- 25-28—**Return of the Con**, NaDobra, Box 46759, London SW17 9YG, UK. nadobra.com. Thistle, Bristol. Tolkien con.

APRIL 2005

- 1-3—**MidSouthCon**, Box 11446, Memphis TN 38111. (731) 664-6730. Holiday Inn on Democrat. E. Friesner, Cherryh.
- 1-3—**MiniCon**, Box 8297, Minneapolis MN 55408. mnstf.org. Sheraton, Bloomington MN. Pratchett, Fastner & Larsen.
- 1-3—**TechniCon**, Box 256, Blacksburg VA 24063. technicon.org. Blacksburg VA. L. M. Bujold. "The Age of Chivalry."
- 1-3—**FILKONTario**, 145 Rice Ave. #98, Hamilton ON L9C 6R3. filkontario.ca. S. MacDonald. SF/fantasy folksinging.
- 8-10—**Icon**, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. (631) 632-6045. iconsf.org. State Univ. of NY. Big on-campus con.
- 7-10—**DeepSouthCon**, 3522 Kings Lane, Nashville TN 37218. (615) 876-4146. xanadusf.org. M. Resnick, J. Chalker.
- 8-10—**OdysseyCon**, 901 Jenifer, Madison WI 53703. oddcon@oddcon.org. Radisson Inn. Lois McMaster Bujold.
- 8-10—**WillyCon**, Student Ctr. #103, 1111 Main, Wayne NE 68787. scifict@wsc.edu. Wayne State College. Czernada.

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